

## NEWMAN'S RETREAT FROM A LIBERAL EDUCATION\*

DANIEL G MULCAHY†  
*University College, Cork*

According to Newman's theory of a liberal education theoretical knowledge and mental discipline are acquisitions to be highly valued for the breadth of vision and sharpness of intellect they impart to those who possess them. Despite the high regard in which this theory is held, it is the argument of this paper that the claims made by Newman on its behalf are highly inconsistent with philosophical positions taken by him in some of his non educational writings, a point altogether overlooked in the literature. Thus the author attempts to demonstrate by reference to Newman's distinction between notional apprehension and real apprehension, and by examining its implications for the theory of a liberal education

For over a century Cardinal Newman's educational thought has gained the attention of scholars and educators alike. Uppermost in their minds has been his idea of a university education, incorporating his theory of a liberal education (1, 4, 11, 17, 20, 22). It is understandable that Newman should command such attention for not only has he spoken eloquently and persuasively but he has spoken very approvingly of university education. For Newman, the attractions of university education are many

It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant (16, p 157)

As are its benefits. It prepares one

\*References to Newman's writings in the text are abbreviated as follows. *Oxford university sermons* is abbreviated from *Fifteen sermons preached before the University of Oxford*. *Grammar of assent* is abbreviated from *An essay in aid of a grammar of assent* and *Idea of a university* is abbreviated from *The idea of a university defined and illustrated*.

†Requests for off-prints should be sent to Daniel G Mulcahy, Department of Education, University College Cork.

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 (16, p. 157).

The social value of a university education is also recognized. 'If then a practical end must be assigned to a university course,' Newman points out, 'I say it is that of training good members of society. Its art is the art of social life, and its end is fitness for the world (16, pp. 156-158)'. Not surprisingly, writers on university education of the calibre of Robert Hutchins and Jacques Maritain freely enlist the support of Newman.

In our western intellectual tradition which has so prized the ideal of theoretical knowledge, admirers and commentators on Newman have tended to emphasize those elements in his writings which support that tradition. And one can hardly fault them for this. For while Newman considered religious and moral education necessary parts of university education, it is the liberal component of a university education, also considered an essential part, which he highlights. Likewise, it is this aspect of his educational thought which is considered to be of the most lasting value.

According to Newman's theory of a liberal education, knowledge as contained in the disciplines or sciences, is characterized by a certain unity. This it derives from the object of knowledge, the universe, to which God, the creator, has imparted the unity. With this in mind, and relying on the medieval concept of the circle of the sciences, the idea of a liberal education is seen to consist in a knowledge of the sciences and their interrelations. The intellectual discipline involved in studying the sciences, in turn, develops the critical faculties. Altogether, then, a liberal education for Newman consisted in a knowledge of the sciences or disciplines and a critical intelligence (12).

Elsewhere I have argued that Newman's theory of a liberal education has its limitations from the point of view of its internal consistency (11). If examined in the broader context of his other work, the theory seems involved in further inconsistencies which have very serious implications both for the theory of a liberal education itself and for Newman's idea of a university. Accordingly, it is the purpose of this paper to identify the source of these inconsistencies and to examine their implications for Newman's theory of a liberal education.

The extent to which the vast literature on Newman's educational

theory has been based on his predominantly educational writings alone is remarkable. Though there are exceptions (6, 10) many commentators on Newman's educational thought have not taken into consideration anything beyond the *Idea of a university*. Yet, the *Idea of a university*, first published in 1853, the *University sketches*, and *My campaign in Ireland*, Newman's major educational writings, comprise a small proportion of his total output, and their composition occupied no more than about eight years of his life at most. Moreover, these were years of great stress for Newman. As first Rector of the newly-founded Catholic University of Ireland not only was he concerned with getting the university firmly established, but he had to cope also with the distressing demands of the Irish hierarchy (3, 6, 10). This is reflected in his writings where he hedges on certain issues as well as in his ambiguity of meaning in places. But the occasion of these writings greatly influenced their content and argument in quite another respect also. In Dublin, Newman was not concerned in a merely academic way with expounding the nature of a university education. As was so often his case, Newman's Dublin writings were part of his efforts to sell an idea, in this case the idea of a university education to a nation generally ambivalent as to its benefits. This is not to say that Newman did not believe in the truth of what he wrote. Yet under such circumstances one cannot expect him to have understated his case for a liberal education.

However, I mention these matters only by way of introduction. My main concern here is not in using the historical circumstances surrounding Newman's educational writings as the primary basis for their reinterpretation. A reinterpretation I do suggest, but it is based largely on other grounds. These grounds are those writings of Newman wherein the educational ideal he so ably portrayed in his educational writings finds almost outright rejection. I have in mind what might be called his philosophical or psychological writings. Often considered his best work, they certainly contain some of his most representative

In both the *Oxford university sermons* and the *Grammar of assent*, Newman presents a theory of knowing which should startle any serious reader of the *Idea of a university*. Specifically, I refer to his theory of apprehension and assent, which includes his celebrated distinction between notional and real apprehension, and his concept of reasoning in concrete affairs. The implications which these hold for Newman's educational thought are profound. Accordingly, they call for closer attention than they have received hitherto in this regard.

At first, Newman's theory of apprehension seems to contain little by way of novelty. Knowledge of the external world is ultimately dependent upon the senses. From knowledge so gained, the mind can arrive at knowledge of an abstract or theoretical nature. But at this point he introduces an important distinction between knowledge received directly through the senses and knowledge which comes from abstraction.

In the *Grammar of assent*, Newman describes apprehension as 'an intelligent acceptance of the idea or of the fact which a proposition enunciates (15, pp 16-17),' or an interpretation of the terms of which it is composed (15, p 11). As such it constitutes knowledge (15, pp 11-12, 16, p 41). But propositions are of two kinds. When they stand for what is abstract or general, such as 'man is an animal,' they are termed notional propositions. They are notional in that they are concerned not with real things, e.g., a man, but with notions, e.g., man, meaning the idea of man. Propositions in which the terms are singular and in which they stand for real individual things, such as 'Philip was the father of Alexander,' are called real propositions. The apprehension of these is termed real apprehension (15, pp 7-8).

Real apprehension by which one gains knowledge of particulars, and notional apprehension, in which one arrives at knowledge of universals, are also distinguishable by a noticeable contrast in their effects. Since abstractions and notions are not nearly as immediate as concrete reality, notional apprehension is not as impressive as real. Real apprehension is more arresting, more vivid and forceful. As a consequence, real apprehension gives rise to a tendency to action not found in notional apprehension (13, pp 122, 127, 134; 15, pp 9-10, 29-31). The distinction between both modes of apprehension is further accentuated by the inability of notions of things consistently and accurately to represent those things. Notions are simply aspects, more or less exact, of what they purport to represent. Sometimes, even, they are mistakes from the beginning (15, p 38).

Nevertheless, each mode of apprehension has its merits and its limitations. To have notional apprehension is to have breadth of mind but to be shallow, to have real apprehension is to be deep but narrow-minded. The former is the principle of advancement of knowledge, the latter is its conservative principle. Without the apprehension of notions one would be confined to a limited amount of knowledge, yet without a firm grasp of things one would waste time in vague speculations.

However, real apprehension has priority in that it is the measure of the notional. The more complete the mind's grasp of things, the more accurate its notions of them (15, pp 27-28, 8)

Assent, which is defined by Newman as 'the absolute acceptance of a proposition without any condition (15, p 11)' is also affected differently by notional and real apprehension. In each case the same absolute adhesion of mind to the proposition assented to is present. But even though all assents are unreserved and unconditional, they can and do differ in strength. Thus, while assent can be given to a proposition irrespective of whether the proposition is notionally or really apprehended, the assent is elicited more heartily and with more fervour when it is made upon real apprehension, having things for its object, than when made upon notional apprehension, having mere notions for its object (15 pp 13-14, 16, 30). Accepting Newman's distinction between notional and real assent, then, it is possible to visualise a scale of assents ranging from casually accepted up to tenaciously held assents. Typically notional assents are found on the lower reaches of the scale while real assents are located near its upper reaches (15, p 28)

With his theory of apprehension Newman has laid the basis for his concept of reasoning in concrete affairs. According to Newman, one reasons when one holds this in virtue of that. In reasoning, knowledge, based on some previous knowledge, is arrived at indirectly, as distinct from the direct way in which it is gained through the senses. Usually it constitutes a simple act, though for purposes of analysis it is portrayed as a series of acts. Proceeding by a 'sort of instinctive perception, from premiss to conclusion', one first apprehends the antecedent and then the consequent, without any awareness of the medium connecting the two. Ordinarily reasoning is spontaneous. It is carried on without one's knowing how and without any effort or intention on one's part (15, pp 197-198, 13 pp 206 207, 256-260)

Such is the nature of reasoning, or 'ratiocination' as Newman sometimes calls it, in its ordinary or natural state and as it is typically found in the uneducated. Not that it is any the less reliable for that. Indeed, it is comparable to the memory or the senses. Like these, it deceives one occasionally, yet there is no reason in principle why it should not be correct in the knowledge which it supplies. But even occasional inaccuracies can be overcome by a method in which the reasoning process is analysed and which can serve as an intellectual standard and common measure between minds. This is the method of logical inference. How-

ever, inference need not be expressed as technically as it is found in the Aristotelian syllogism. Verbal reasoning, as distinct from mental reasoning, qualifies as inference and differs from logic only in that logic is its scientific form (15, pp 198-200, 13, pp 257-259)

A comparison of inference with assent will be helpful. Inference is described by Newman as the conditional acceptance of a proposition. Assent, he has said, is the unconditional acceptance of a proposition. Besides, whereas the truth serves as the object of assent, the object of inference is the 'truth-like' (15, p 119). Consequently, Newman adds, inference is primarily concerned with labels or words, and does not reach as far as facts. It is employed in formulae and deals with real objects only in so far as they constitute the materials of argument (15, p 69). The normal state of inference is to apprehend propositions as notions. When it is exercised on things it tends to be little more than conjecture, with little or no logical force (15, p 32).

In so far as logical inference proposes to provide both a test and a common measure of reasoning Newman finds it to be only partly successful. The fact that it can and does fail is attributable to the relation between words and the thoughts they stand for, as in a somewhat similar way the weakness of notions lies in their failure properly to represent things. Words, Newman maintains, cannot satisfactorily attain an accurate representation of thoughts. The symbols employed in mathematics to which definite and unchanging values are assigned may perfectly represent those values. As such, mathematics is extremely suited to the method of logical inference. But the same is not true of words (15, pp 36-40).

Newman is by no means alone on this. In his *Studies in humanism*, Schiller has written that 'the "logical" context never recovers its full concreteness and so can never guarantee to "Logic" a knowledge of the actual meaning (19, p 87)'. He continues, a little later,

In abstracting from the assessor's actual meaning, 'Logic' always runs the risk of excluding the real point. For this may lie in some of the 'irrelevant' psychical details of the actual meaning, whose essence may not lie in its plain surface meaning, but in some subtle innuendo (19 p 87)

Bergson, too, writes in this vein. He says, *fixed concepts can be extracted by our thought from the mobile reality, but there is no means*

*whatever of reconstituting with the fixity of concepts the mobility of the real'* But, he continues, this is not so with intuitive knowledge, for this *'establishes itself in the moving reality and adopts the life itself of things* (2, pp 223-224, 227) ' In this way, intuition attains the absolute—the real for Newman Newman's approach is similar to that of both Schiller and Bergson Whereas mathematical symbols lose nothing when placed in the syllogism, words, he writes, when so placed are stripped of much of their living meaning Eventually they represent no more than an aspect of the thing or thought they purported to represent Thus, are rivers, 'full, winding, and beautiful' transformed into 'navigable canals,' for not without doing violence to the real living world, which is as little a logical world as it is a poetical one, can it be attenuated into a logical formula Similarly, when inference converts real things into notions, so as to manipulate them according to its own method, it misrepresents them When employed upon questions of fact, it can conclude only in the abstract and to probabilities not to truths (15, pp 200-204, 18, 21)

The limitations of inference then are attributed to the inadequacy of notional knowledge or apprehension Dealing in abstractions and generalities, it can neither fully capture the real nor conclude to anything more than a probability in practical affairs But when real knowledge replaces notional as the content of arguments, conclusions with regard to concrete matters are both insightful and more reliable And it is in this insistence on the greater insight into practical affairs and the higher degree of reliability that one can attribute to conclusions afforded by real knowledge that Newman's disavowal of some of the central theses of his theory of a liberal education becomes apparent This can be shown without too much difficulty

Cronin has identified three principles which serve as a guide to Newman's views on the question of practical reasoning, and they can be relied upon to advantage here (5, pp 33-39) The first of these is simply that Newman accepts and treats of reasoning as he actually finds it A second is that life is made for action 'Life is for action,' says Newman 'if we insist on proofs for everything, we shall never come to action (14, p 295)' Scholarly argument and debate might well be a part of 'liberal curiosity' for those who can afford it (14, p 295) But it is not suited to the multitude By nature, says Newman, striking a pragmatic note 'we are so constituted that faith, not knowledge or argument, is our principle of action (13, p 188)' In fact, argument and

debate very often lead to scepticism. But when people's emotions and interests are involved, action is not long wanting. And this leads to Cronin's final principle, namely, that for Newman it is not the intellect alone but the whole of man that reasons. To the majority of men, argument can make a point more doubtful and much less impressive. Man is not merely a rational animal. He also feels and acts (5, pp 33-39, 15, pp 72-82, 120-124, 14, pp 292-297, 13, p 256)

That man lives in a world of sense, in a real world where he is much more concerned and involved with real things than with notions or abstractions, is evident even in his most abstract kinds of argument. Thought is greatly influenced by the human and environmental conditions surrounding it (15, pp 205-206). Often it is those very factors that prove decisive in decisions, unaware as one may be of them. Thus, it is not to the syllogism nor to inferential proofs that one looks for the formative cause of opinions but to those pre-existing beliefs and views 'in which men either already agree with each other or hopelessly differ, before they begin to dispute, and which are hidden deep in our nature, or, it may be, in our personal peculiarities (15, p 210)'. So logic does not really convert or convince one of the truth of anything. To have certitude in concrete matters, 'we require an *organon* more delicate, versatile, and elastic than verbal argumentation (15, p 206)'

Newman is confident that man does possess such an alternative means of proof. The inadequacy of logic, he maintains, can be compensated for by one's 'own living personal reasoning,' by one's 'good sense'. This latter is the healthy condition of such personal reasoning, though it cannot properly express itself in words. It is, for instance, the means by which one is 'possessed with the most precise, absolute, masterful certitude' of his dying sometime, a conclusion to which logic alone could never bring him. Many of one's most strenuously held yet 'reasonable' convictions or certitudes are similarly dependent upon proofs of such an informal and personal nature which simply cannot be brought under logical rule (15, pp 228-229, 13, pp 256-257)

Indeed, in concrete reasoning, one often has to start again from those predicaments from which it was thought logic would relieve him. In such cases, Newman goes on, 'We judge for ourselves, by our own lights, and on our own principles (15, p 230)'. Such processes of reasoning, by which one is led to assent, to action, and to certitude, are far too varied, subtle, and implicit, to permit of being formalised. Human thought is too keen and varied, its sources too remote and



hidden, its path too personal, delicate, and circuitous, and its subject matter too varied and intricate, to be encompassed by any language, however subtle. The ways of reasoning in concrete affairs are deeply personal, and inference or verbal argument is useful only in subordination to their higher logic (15, pp 216, 229-230, 13, pp 256-257). Accordingly it is to the subtle actions of the mind, and not to science, that one must turn to determine the limit of converging probabilities and the reason, sufficient for proof. It is here in the living mind that one locates the ability correctly to employ principles, facts, doctrines, and experiences, true or probable, and to discern to what conclusions they lead once accepted (15, pp 273-274).

At this point, Newman's emphasis on the necessity of real knowledge and practical reasoning for an understanding of concrete matters becomes central to my argument. The next step for Newman, while inevitable, is of the greatest significance. Thus, he asks, heralding his unheeded retreat from the theory of a liberal education, how is 'an exercise of mind, which is for the most part occupied with notions, not things, competent to deal with things, except partially and indirectly (15, p 211)?' There can be no mistake. Here Newman, better than all his critics and adherents alike, offers the most incisive critique to date of his own theory. For in effect what he is asking is, how someone, in virtue of the training given him in a liberal education, 'is equipped to meet the very real and persistent problems of life.

As was seen at the outset, a liberal education for Newman was one whose subject matter was almost totally composed of theoretical or scientific knowledge, that is of notional knowledge. In addition, it involved a training in abstract reasoning and, to use a Piagetian phrase, a development of the formal operations. Altogether, it was said to consist in a breadth of knowledge and a logical facility. But is it not just such knowledge and intellectual dexterity that Newman has now brought into question? Newman's continual emphasis on the need for more practical forms of reasoning when it comes to real life problems leaves no question about this. Elsewhere he reinforces the position further when he writes that the only difference between the person of a liberal education and one who has had no such education is that the former is aware of the mental processes operative in the thinking process while the latter is not. The thinking itself is not affected (13, pp 259-260).

But as if this were not enough, it is in respect of the kind of knowl-

edge it furnishes, scientific or notional knowledge, that a liberal education is open to the most serious criticism. Scientific knowledge, which was held in such high regard when speaking of liberal education, has now been shorn of much of its appeal. Now it is incomplete knowledge, for it can reach truth only in the abstract. Arguments in the abstract cannot handle and determine the concrete. Unable as they are to reach to particulars, they can conclude only to probabilities. Inference, no matter how fully worded, can never go as far as reaching facts. Indicative of Newman's almost total reversal of his position, is his view that inference can come to no 'definite conclusions about matters of fact, except as they are made effectual for their purpose by the living intelligence which uses them (15, pp 211-212)'

The universals of which theoretical knowledge is made up are now found to be unreliable in practice. What is called a universal is only a general, and what is general does not lead to a necessary conclusion. One can infer only to a probability (15, p 212). And herein lies the weakness of formal inference—and of a liberal education to the extent that it shares the exclusive concern of inference with notional knowledge. All of its processes as expressed in language require general notions if they are to reach conclusions. But the appeal to a general principle or law, made to prove a particular case, never attains sufficient force to warrant anything more than a probable conclusion (15, pp 215-218).

Admittedly, formal inference is of some value. It is the great principle of order in thinking. It enables 'the independent intellects of many, acting and re-acting on each other, to bring their collective force to bear upon one and the same subject-matter, or the same question.' Though it does not actually ascertain the truth, it indicates the direction in which it lies. The value of inference as a tool for the advancement of scientific knowledge cannot be discounted easily either. Besides, it does have some value even for living in the real world of concrete realities, for a guide to the probable in life has its value. Furthermore, reasoning by rule is plainly natural to man. He thinks in logic just as he talks in prose, without aiming to do so. He puts his conclusions in objective shape and this tangible record is so associated with his beliefs and so fortifies and illustrates them as to constitute a force which can even bear upon action (15, pp 217-218). And to the extent that all of this is true, it follows that a liberal education retains some value.

Nevertheless, both scientific knowledge and logical inference fall short

of providing an understanding of the concrete realities of life. And with their fate goes very largely that of a liberal education. Scientific knowledge is too abstract and too simple to be the measure of fact, unable as it is to cater for the detail and the colour of real things. Logic is inconclusive, ultimately, in virtue of its starting on the one hand from assumed premises and concluding on the other hand short of the concrete (15, pp 215-218). Real knowledge and practical reasoning are the only means of gaining insight into the practical and important affairs of life.

With this Newman has achieved an almost complete face about. From the position taken in his educational writings in which scientific or notional knowledge and abstract reasoning were held in such high regard, he moves to a position in which the primacy of both is replaced by that of real knowledge and practical reasoning. Moreover, not only has Newman rejected his own theory but he has also cast aspersions on that proud European educational tradition reaching back to Plato and Aristotle which held theoretical knowledge and abstract reasoning in the highest esteem, and from which Newman's own theory took so much.

From a historical viewpoint Newman's change of mind raises a number of interesting questions. Did Newman really overstate his case for a liberal education in Dublin? Did he himself see any inconsistency between his educational thought and his philosophical writings? If so, why did he not indicate this in his many revisions of the *Idea of a university*, the last of which actually appeared some years after the publication of the *Grammar of assent* in 1870? The questions raised from an educational point of view are more serious. For if Newman is correct in his emphasis on the primacy of the real and the need for more practical forms of reasoning, then the traditional university ideal of a liberal education, to which Newman himself contributed so much, is in need of serious re-thinking.

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