The Life of the Spirit

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A PARALLEL BETWEEN NEWMAN AND THOMISM

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Though some writers have tried to prove that Newman was at heart a scholastic, perhaps even a Thomist, the tendency of Newman critics at one time was to go to the opposite extreme and put him forward as the founder of a new philosophy which might even supplant the traditional philosophy of the Church. This idea was behind some of the attempts of Modernists to put Newman forward as the prophet of modern Christian thought and apologetics. Neither of these contentions is justified. Newman was not a Thomist. He had on his shelves the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, but it is doubtful whether he studied St. Thomas, except in the quotations of modern scholastic writers. When he did read the scholastics, his mind was already formed, and Newman was not the man to take up a fundamentally new position in late life. But it was even more true that Newman was not a propounder of a philosophical system in opposition to any other philosophy, either ancient or modern. Though one does find a certain amount of even deep metaphysical thought, particularly in some of his many unpublished *opuscula*, yet metaphysics was at no time Newman's principal interest. In his early days, he does from time to time hint at a sympathy with idealistic metaphysics. But he never commits himself to a single definite statement in its favour, still less an argument. He admits in a very early work a sympathy for the platonism of the Alexandrian Fathers; but he makes it quite clear that it is the Alexandrian Fathers which interest him much more than their platonism; and it is his concern much more to show that they were not eclectics, but genuine platonists, than to put forward any strictly philosophical suggestions of his own. The interested reader will find much food for thought in this connection in Newman's earliest serious work, the *History of the Arians of the Fourth*

Century. Newman does go so far as to point out a likeness between the neoplatonism of the heretics of the fourth century and the rationalism of the Liberals and Neologists of nineteenth century Oxford. The following passage shows how little Newman's interests were metaphysical as such: "Who does not recognize in this old philosophy the chief features of that recent school of liberalism and false illumination, political and moral, which is Satan's instrument in deluding the nations, but which is worse and more earthly than it, inasmuch as his former artifice, affecting a religious ceremonial, could not but leave so much of substantial truth mixed in the system as to impress its disciples with somewhat of a lofty and serious character, utterly foreign to the cold, scoffing spirit of modern rationalism?" (*Arians*, p. 31).

The truth is that Newman was not by vocation a philosopher except when it was necessary to serve the purposes of his peculiar type of theological apologetic. But, having said this, we must remove at once any impression that Newman never touched upon any of the great problems familiar to St. Thomas, and, since his time, to all his disciples. On the contrary, much could be written to show a very close relation of thought between Newman and Thomism. This is most of all remarkable with regard to what is perhaps the root philosophical principle of Thomism, the principle of the analogy of being. The interesting thing about this is that not only does it connect Newman with St. Thomas, but it cuts him off completely from the philosophy of Le Roy, which might be said to be the basic philosophy of all twentieth century modernism. Now I want to stress that this principle was not some haphazard utterance of Newman, which I have searched for, as people no doubt sometimes do, in order to be able to link together two leading Christian prophets. It is just as basic to Newman's most cherished theological thought, as it is to St. Thomas's philosophy. Nor is it a study which Newman made just once, and then laid the question on one side. Some thinkers seem to have the faculty of considering questions separately in water-tight compartments without ever coming back to them in after life: so that sometimes they are even surprised at what they wrote in their early years. Newman had not that type of mind. He wrote nothing which he did not live; and, if anything struck him as an important aspect of the world we inhabit, he would keep on returning to it through the course of his life.

Such is the nature of Newman's contribution to the doctrine of analogy. He first began to work out his ideas in his earliest serious work. He elaborates them considerably in his *Oxford University Sermons*, and, after that time, the same ideas are continually recurring. To the end of his life, he remained convinced of the ultimate soundness of this thought. Of course, it

is equally important to realize that he never thought of it as the doctrine of analogy. I doubt if he ever uses any of the technical scholastic terms. I doubt whether he knew them. It would be interesting to try to trace the common source of his thought and scholastic thought in this matter, if common source there be outside the possibility of two minds arriving at an independent conviction of some aspect of reality. Newman claimed to have gained the doctrine from the Alexandrian Fathers. If he was right in his claim, then presumably they inherited it from Plato. If we contend that Aristotle also took it from his master, Plato would be the interesting common source of a doctrine which is not so strikingly manifested in his philosophy as it is in that of Aristotle, unless it can be deduced from the line of thought which leads Socrates to the Idea of the Good in the *Republic*, and to subsistent ideas in other dialogues.

Newman's first groping towards this principle is found in his explanations of the Alexandrian doctrine of Economy. According to this principle, on the supposition that there is much truth in non-Christian religions, people may best be led to the Church by our presenting Christian doctrine to them as far as possible in terms of the philosophy they already understand. On the same principle, certain other doctrines might be kept back from the inquirer, lest he should be scandalized through a misunderstanding at the outset. It is the way in which we teach children the catechism. We explain truths beyond their comprehension as best we can through the medium of those we know. The method is described as an "accommodation to the feelings and prejudices of the hearer, in leading him to the reception of a novel or unacceptable doctrine . . . because those who are strangers to the tone of thought and principles of the speaker, cannot at once be initiated into his system, and because they must begin with imperfect views . . . " (*Arians*, pp. 71-72).

I think the reader will be able to see in this without much help the beginnings of a doctrine of the possibility of teaching something about a truth by imperfect analogical language. The catechist of the example is not handing over mere words to his pupils. His language is admittedly deficient, but he is by means of it giving some glimpse of the truth, which otherwise would be impossible. The object of the catechist or catechetical school, in the case of Alexandria, is not to stop short at an imperfect view, still less at a false one; but to lead the inquirer nearer and nearer to a perfect and integral view of the truth, by continually modifying the original imperfect representation more in accordance with the original. Thus today the teacher may take some very crude example, such as the shamrock, to give to her class some first ideas of the mystery of the Trinity, as we are told in fact St. Patrick did.

It is not a big step from this economical way of teaching Christianity to the analogical way in which we learn what little we are able about God. We are children. God cannot teach us here except by means of ideas which we have first gained from earthly things. Does this mean he cannot teach us at all? It was the modernist, not Newman nor St. Thomas, who answered this question in the affirmative. All Christian philosophers have unconsciously, if not consciously, answered that God can. St. Thomas clearly expresses this state of things when he writes, "Our intellect cannot attain to the divine simplicity itself, according as it should in itself be considered: and for this reason, it apprehends and gives names to divine truths in its own (natural) way, i.e. according to what it finds in the data of sense, from which it derives its knowledge." (*Summa Theol.* 1-23-2). Such formulae are objective, or they would be equivocal; most imperfect and inadequate, since God is infinite and all our notions finite. About their objectivity Newman wrote in this early work: "The great doctrines of the faith . . . were the subject of an Apostolical Tradition; they were the very truths which had been lately revealed to mankind . . . They were facts, not opinions." (*Arians*, p. 134). And yet they were grossly inadequate. "The Object of religious veneration being unseen, and dissimilar from all that is seen, reason can but represent it in the medium of those ideas which the experience of life affords (as we see in the Scripture account, as far as it is addressed to the intellect); and unless these ideas, however inadequate, be correctly applied to it, they re-act upon the affections and deprave the religious principle." (*Arians*, p. 144). On the following page Newman makes his position still more clear "whatever is told us from heaven, is true in so full and substantial a sense, that no possible mistake can arise practically from following it."

During the years which intervened between his work on the Arians and his Oxford University Sermons, this idea of the analogical, yet true, nature of all the ideas and words with which we attempt to express divine truths was a first principle in Newman's mind. I have explained elsewhere how, for a very short period, Newman came near to stressing to such an extent the inevitable imperfection of our terms as to play with the notion that perhaps we really can know nothing about God at all. But he never really gave way to this temptation, and, from the beginning, he realized that it must be a false and un-Christian scepticism which prompted it.

But he saw the force of the objection very clearly when he wrote his Oxford University Sermons. In one of those sermons he thus propounds the difficulty in all its force, such as it might have been expressed many years later by Le Roy. "How can teaching and intercourse, how can human words, how can earthly

images, convey to the mind an idea of the Invisible? . . . They can suggest no idea, but what is resolvable into ideas natural and earthly. The words "Person", "Substance", "Consubstantial", "Generation", "Procession", "Incarnation", "Taking of the manhood into God", and the like, have either a very abject and human meaning, or none at all . . . It follows that our anathemas, our controversies, our struggles, our sufferings, are merely about the poor ideas conveyed to us in certain figures of speech." (*U.S.*, pp. 338, 339).

If we can suggest no sort of answer to such an objection, what becomes of the Christian revelation? Does it not claim that, though expressed in human words—words associated with knowledge gained through the senses, words which, it would seem, could never give us other than material or at the utmost natural information—it nevertheless expresses the supernatural, the divine?

Newman's first answer is an appeal to the power of divine grace, which is able to refine and elevate everything in this world, including our earthly ideas, to become the instrument of the divine. "If, as we all acknowledge, grace renews our moral feelings, yet through outward means, if it opens upon us new ideas about virtue and goodness and heroism and heavenly peace, it does not appear why, in a certain sense, it may not impart ideas concerning the nature of God." (*U.S.*, p. 339). St. Thomas speaks similarly about faith: "In many respects faith perceives the invisible things in a higher way than natural reason does in proceeding to God from his creatures. Hence it is written (*Eccles.* iii, 25): Many things are shown to thee above the understanding of man." (2.2ae-2-3, ad3; trans. of Eng. Dom.).

Newman also appeals to the fact that ideas which were in origin earthly may, by new combinations, give us a partly negative and partly analogical notion of some heavenly truth, such as the Incarnation or the Trinity. The idea thus gained will be a complex representation of a simple truth, an extremely incomplete notion of that which is all-perfection; but does it follow that it is therefore useless, or false, as far as it goes? Did the terms convey to us a complete image of God, we should no longer see things "in a glass darkly, but face to face"; and we should enjoy the Beatific Vision which is reserved for the life of final union with God.

Nothing then can be more certain, if we are to retain our position as creatures without denying to ourselves all power of intellect, than that the truth in such matters must be somewhere between the extremes. Faith would be nothing if there were no correspondence between our ideas and the truths of Revelation; it would no longer be faith, but vision, if there were complete correspondence. Moreover, we must never forget that

the darkness and obscurity which come to us as a result of these mysterious doctrines about God, expressed in words which cannot be adequate to express their object, even if we were capable of understanding it, nevertheless can only be removed by the removal of whatever light God has given us. For the shadows only come with the light. "When you knew nothing of revealed light, you knew not revealed darkness. Religious truth requires you should be told *something*, your own imperfect nature prevents you knowing *all;* and to know *something*, and *not all—partial knowledge*—must of course perplex; doctrines imperfectly revealed must be mysterious." (*P.S.* i, p. 211). As Newman explains in another Parochial Sermon (*P.S.* iv, p. 290), we must not say the words used in revelation have no meaning in themselves, but they have no meaning which we can fully comprehend. God by these words means some aspect of his own Essence. He knows that we cannot comprehend it, but he enables us by faith to take what is given in so far as our imperfection allows it, and be content. We must never say there is no meaning, even in our understanding by faith; but it is darkness. There is no clear meaning. St. Thomas expressed this most emphatically when he said that the object of faith is of its nature obscure (*Summa*, 2.2ae-1-4). St. John of the Cross builds up on the same notion his whole description of the Dark Night of the Spirit. "But remember," writes the latter, "among all creatures, the highest and the lowest, there is not one that comes near unto God, or that bears any likeness to his substance. For, though it be true, as theologians tell us, that all creatures bear a certain relation to God, and are tokens of his being, some more, some less, according to the greater or less perfection of their nature, yet there is no essential likeness or communion between them and him; yea, rather the distance between his divine nature and their nature is infinite. Hence, then, it is impossible for the understanding to attain perfectly unto God, by means of created things, whether of heaven or of earth, because there is no proportion of similitude between them."

Newman and St. Thomas both took this emphasis on the darkness of all our ideas concerning God from the Fathers. It is noticeable that when St. Thomas is proving that our ideas of God are not equivocal, he uses the term "completely equivocal", almost as though he wished to express clearly that our ideas are so far short of being adequate that they are much nearer to the earthly in imperfection than to the heavenly truth they are trying to express.

It is strange but significant of the misunderstanding to which Newman has been subjected that he has been blamed by some for his doctrine of the Economy, and by others for his denial of

scholastic analogy in favour of the modern symbolism. The whole cause of the latter accusation is due to Newman's terminology in one of his Oxford University Sermons, where he does use the word "Symbol" frequently, but not in its technical modern sense. In normal English usage the word is not used technically as opposed to "analogy". One has to decide from the context what is exactly its force. Newman does sometimes use the terms "Symbolism" and "Symbolizing" more or less in their modern technical sense, as representing a rationalist attitude to dogma, which he rejects. But on other occasions he calls dogmas *symbols* of a Divine fact, more or less in the sense of analogical representations. That this is so is clear from the fact that, in the same breath, he calls dogmas *direct contemplations*. An equivocal symbol could not be called a *direct contemplation*.

To explain how dogmas can be symbols in one sense and yet direct contemplations in another sense, Newman has recourse again to the analogy of catechism. "Children, who are made our pattern in Scripture, are taught, by an accommodation, on the part of their teachers, to their immature faculties and their scanty vocabulary . . . What is short of truth in the letter may be to them the most perfect truth, that is, the nearest approach to truth, compatible with their condition." (*U.S.*, pp. 340, 341). In other words, Newman points out that this has always been the way in which God has dealt with man. Indeed, what other way could our heavenly Father deal with his children? In a footnote to the later edition of the University Sermons, Newman uses the example of a blind man's knowledge of the objects we see. "For, in whichever respect, whether as in substance or by a shadow, the blind man knows the objects of sight, in the same are those things, in 'which eye has not seen nor ear heard', apprehended by us now, 'in a glass darkly' *per speculum in aenigmate*." (*U.S.*, p. 349).

In the Grammar of Assent, he uses a mathematical illustration of a theological "economy". "Hence in science we sometimes use a definition or a *formula*, not as exact, but as being sufficient for our purpose, for working out certain conclusions, for practical approximation, the error being small, till a certain point is reached. This is what in theological investigations I should call economy." (*G.A.*, p. 47).

In all this the scholastic reader must appreciate that Newman is speaking in popular language; it is unjust to press too far the sort of examples which are used by way of illustration. But enough has been quoted to show that in all cases the doctrine which Newman was trying to express in a popular manner was none other than the doctrine of analogy. He gives no definitions, no distinctions between the analogy of proportion and the