Newman's Contribution to Conceptualizing Rhetorical Reason

Logic makes but a sorry rhetoric with the multitudes; Logicians are more set upon concluding rightly, than on right conclusions. — J. H. Newman

The reverse is no doubt true; Rhetoric makes but a sorry logic for the logicians. Those of us who wish to mount a proper defense of rhetorical logic (or, "rhetorical reason") must clearly elucidate the concept and its practice. Why have scholars of rhetorical reasoning not systematically explicated its elements, its scope and its methodology in order to establish a more unified conception? The very nature of rhetoric militates against unification, to be sure, but some progress is still possible in this regard. Rhetorical reason is presently little more than an amorphous apparition in the universe of rhetorical studies; appearing in the literature from time to time, haunting discourse on informal reasoning. Contemporary rhetorical theorists, when addressing these matters, tend to underscore the limits of logic and argue that rhetorical reason fills that void, but their concern is never with the method of rhetorical reason qua method. They establish the need for rhetorical reason and establish its province (usually by juxtaposing it with formal logic), but must often turn to other aspects of their program instead of elucidating a methodology.¹ My own discussion of the methodology of rhetorical reasoning, in Philosophy and Rhetoric, typifies the above comments: It explores the role of rhetorical reasoning in ethical inquiry, but ends up only reestablishing the need for a complement to demonstrative reasoning.² The methodology of rhetorical reasoning receives only scant treatment. How does one articulate the scope and method of such an elusive and multifarious concept? One could combine a number of contemporary perspectives into a composite view of rhetorical reason, but a new beginning seems to be in order; attempts to piece together a methodology from the scholars mentioned above would produce only a piecemeal project.

¹ The term "rhetorical reason" surfaces from time to time in scholarship on rhetorical theory, but has yet to be fully conceptualized. See, for example: Walter Jost's Rhetorical Thought in John Henry Newman, chapters Four and Seven; Lawrence Prelli's A Rhetoric of Science. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 5-7 & chapter 11; Chaim Perelman's "The Rational and the Reasonable" in The New Rhetoric and the Humanities, (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1979) and "The New Rhetoric: A Theory of Practical Reasoning" in The Great Ideas Today 1970. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1970) especially pp. 273-84. For Walter Jost rhetorical reason is synonymous with informal reasoning; for Lawrence Prelli it is analogous to topical logic; for Chaim Perelman it is non other than reasoning itself (as opposed to the rational). (A fuller treatment of this theme may be found in my doctoral dissertation: "Casuistry and the Quest for Rhetorical Reason: Conceptualizing a Method of Shared Moral Inquiry," University of Washington, 1993.)

One is hard pressed to find a better place from which to make a fresh start than John Henry Cardinal Newman’s Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent. In a sense, Newman’s Grammar is to a methodology of rhetorical reason what Immanuel Kant’s Groundwork of a Metaphysic of Morals is to a treatise on morals. Newman’s Grammar makes a subtle yet powerful contribution to two particular aspects of the conceptualization of rhetorical reason. The epistemological groundwork for his “illative sense” and his doctrine on the limitations of logic combine to establish clear boundaries for the province of rhetorical reason. Establishing the province for rhetorical reason is the first step toward reviving it as a practice because modes of reason are rightly understood in relation to one another and with respect to the proper function of each within the regime of human faculties. In another aspect of his work Newman portends both Stephen Toulmin and Perelman. Toulmin and Perelman both stress the importance of recognizing that formal logic works best in the realm of necessity, but that much of ordinary reasoning involves probability. In other words, practical judgments rarely admit of mathematical certainty. Having established and defended their distinction, both Toulmin and Perelman move on to consider other aspects of informal reasoning. What is needed (beyond “marking of boundaries”) to make the case for rhetorical reasoning more compelling, is an account of how rhetorical reasoning operates and why it is well suited to redress the limitations of formal logic. Newman’s conception of “converging probabilities” accomplishes both. Newman’s Grammar elucidates a key component of any methodology of rhetorical reasoning. This inquiry is important to rhetoricians, for only in conducting such examinations can we hope to articulate a defense of rhetorical reasoning sufficient to satisfy — if we can — the logicians’ demands for a coherent account of the function and scope of rhetorical reason. Furthermore, it is a worthy enterprise because a coherent account is, regardless of the logician’s demands, a good in itself.

Approaching the Text

Newman’s famous conversion from the Anglican to the Catholic church no doubt influenced the scope and thrust of the Grammar. The burden of accountability must have been enormous; many souls in England and abroad looked to him as a spiritual authority. “Are you certain you are right?” “Yes.” “How do you know that your certainty is not misplaced?” Newman had to contend with the weight of spiritual leadership, and that weight alone would have sufficiently fueled the Grammar of Assent.

Newman’s correspondence shows how his longtime friendship with William Froude also influenced a good bit of the Grammar’s agenda. Froude was a rationalist, a skeptic, an agnostic and a relativist, and those of his school, “allowed only formal argumentation as a source of truly valuable knowledge: that method alone was worthy of the human intellect, and anything that went beyond it or came from another source, however alluring or sympathetic, had to be considered ... an immoral use of the faculties” (Boekraad, 166). Rationalists of that school tended to elevate the method of thinking proper to their own field of learning into a norm for all other fields, and Newman felt the need to show them, especially Froude, the error in so doing. A. J. Boekraad notes that Newman focused on rationalism’s limitations, “hoping in this way to show that the most ‘tough-minded’ rationalist could never be true to his principles as soon as he left the sphere of abstract notions” (Boekraad, 169). In other words, rather than engage the rationalists of his day by frontal attack, Cardinal Newman assumed a strategy that ultimately subdues the honest rationalist with the internal illogic of his own method. Newman addresses himself to one other aspect of the intellectual milieu of his day: cynicism regarding certitude.

In correspondence of November 1869 to Charles Meynell, Newman wrote, “the deepest men say that we can never be certain of anything — and it has been my object therefore in a good part of my volume to prove that there is such a thing as unconditional assent” (Lash, 11). In other words, because a number of the prominent thinkers of his day had waxed cynical regarding certitude, Newman made the defense of certitude his aim. According to Walter Jost, Newman’s strategy entailed a rhetorical move to:

[Dis]solve what had come to be recognized even in his own time as an ingrained overestimation of the power of scientific “reason” and “notions” as they were usually defined. Newman’s point, in the Grammar as in the Oxford sermons, is decisively not to abandon reason for unreason, but to invite his readers to recognize that, among the other types of belief they embrace, faith is itself a mode of reasoning, one exercised on a concrete indeterminancy and as such not amenable (if one is to focus on the concrete) to that theoretical “reason” to which faith had been compared in the past (Jost, 70).

These are the two prominent exigencies to which Newman addresses himself in the Grammar, and these can be expressed in the form of one central problematic: How does one, especially in matters of religion, attain certitude from probable reasoning? Or, What is the intellectual process by which one passes from conditional inference to unconditional assent? Hence, according to John Coulson, “… the argument of the Grammar of Assent is that although we respond to religious truths or ideas as a whole, our certitude of their truth is acquired gradually, step by step, and is not an immediate certainty (Coulson, 61).

Newman’s solution to the problem of belief is “that by the nature of the human mind we assent absolutely on reasons which taken separately are but probabilities” (Lash, 11). This act of mind — one that the rationalists of Newman’s day would deem impossible — he calls “the Illative Sense, or right judgment in ratiocination” (269).

3 I say a “critical component” of the methodology of rhetorical reasoning because, in the final analysis, Newman’s Grammar contributes to our understanding of only one facet of the method of rhetorical reasoning. The examination of the illative sense in the Grammar helps one get a sense of the subtle movement of the mind as it draws informal inferences: a complete methodology ought to also account for the application of these “habits of mind” to actual cases. The former emphasizes the spirit of rhetorical reasoning; the latter emphasizes the faculty of rhetorical reasoning. While Newman’s work is important, one must pursue other lines of inquiry in order to complete the methodology.

4 See Boekraad, 163 ff.
THE ILLATIVE SENSE

Faced with the inescapable realities of a "being like man on a stage such as the world," Newman, "instead of devising, what cannot be, some sufficient science of reasoning which may compel certitude in concrete conclusions," opted rather to:

[Confess that there is no ultimate test of truth besides the testimony born to truth by the mind itself, and that this phenomenon, perplexing as we may find it, is a normal and inevitable characteristic of the mental constitution. ...(and, mental) progress is a living growth, not a mechanism; and its instruments are mental acts, not the formulas and contrivances of language (274-5).

Newman's bridge from probable premises to certain conclusions is uniquely grounded. As noted earlier, the rationalists of Newman's day held that their method alone was worthy of the human intellect, and that informal reasoning was "... an immoral use of the faculties" (Bockraad, 166). But Newman asks the audacious question: "Don't we experience certitude in moral matters all the time?"

Having asked the question, Newman had three options: (a) To formulate a science of reasoning that accounts for certitude in moral questions, (b) To become a cynic or a relativist, and (c) To construct an interpretation of moral certitude congruent with his common sense reflections on the nature of the case. Of course (b) was not really an option for Newman, so he opted to break ground, constrained as he was by his conception of the nature of moral certitude. Hence, the illative sense, the "controlling principle of inference," is:

Thus the Illative Sense, that is, the reasoning faculty, as exercised by gifted, or by educated or otherwise well-prepared minds, (and it has its function in the beginning, middle, and end of all verbal discussion and inquiry, and in every step of the process. It is a rule to itself, and appeals to no judgment beyond its own (283).

That is, it is the total, mature functioning of the various faculties of reasoning, working in tandem, that verifies whether certitude is correctly elicited of a given inference. Once he established that the mind of the individual is "a rule to itself," Newman faces the difficult question that follows: "Is there any criterion of the accuracy of an inference, such as may be our warrant that certitude is rightly elicited" (271)? Newman contends that the illative sense provides internal verification of the correctness of a given certitude. This explanation does not satisfy, of course, so he illustrates his illative sense vis-à-vis _phronesis_; that is, he elaborates his conception of the illative sense "by referring to parallel faculties, which we commonly recognize without difficulty" (276-7).

The foremost of these parallel faculties is _phronesis_. Newman acknowledges Aristotle's authority on the subject: "As regards moral duty, the subject is fully considered in the well-known ethical treatises of Aristotle. He calls the faculty

which guides the mind in matters of conduct, by the name of _phronesis_, or judgment. This is the directing, controlling and determining principle in such matters, personal and social" (277). Newman then contributes to Aristotle's treatment by suggesting how _phronesis_ works beyond the realm of moral conduct; in the realm of belief. Virtue is a matter of action, and action requires judgment; correct judgment in matters of conduct is the immediate yield of _phronesis_, and _phronesis_ perfected (through habituation) is the key to moral virtue. Moral virtue is, of course, the "engine" that drives the entire eudaimonist school (of which Newman is a principal). Eudaimonia (happiness) is the sumnum bonum for humanity and _phronesis_ is the esprit d’etre of eudaimonia. The illative sense extends _phronesis_ beyond the realm of moral development by illustrating the parallels between individual growth in virtue and individual growth in belief (or faith).

Newman's extension of practical wisdom from matters of conduct to questions of assent requires a concurrent extension of the means whereby certitude is achieved. Certitude in matters of conduct is a matter of finding means between extremes in a given instance. Achieving certitude in matters of assent requires, as Newman puts it, "a more subtle instrument. "Newman secures this move by arguing that "probabilities in their convergence" provide certitude in such matters, so it is the illative sense that both brings together and confirms the correctness of the various proofs of a complex, informal assent. In order to appropriate that insight, we must first conduct a careful examination of the epistemological groundwork for the illative sense. The epistemology that sanctions the illative sense, with its attendant critique of formal logic, is precisely the point where Newman helps fix the borders of the realm of rhetoric. However, before we can appropriate Newman's contribution, we must understand Newman's phraseology (which is to say, we must first attend to his intricate _grammar_ in order to maximize the potential yield from his doctrine).

MATTERS EPISTEMOLOGICAL

Why is the illative sense peculiarly suited to the treatment of ethical, political, and religious (i.e., moral) questions? Newman answers this question in Chapter Nine of the _Grammar_. However, one must understand Newman's phenomenological moves - moves he made especially in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight - to fully appreciate his epistemological moves in Chapter Nine. The first of these moves regards certitude.

Certitude

Bockraad notes that Newman did not attempt to account for certitude - he avoided the metaphysical question. Certitude was rather, for Newman, a starting point for his inquiry.6 Regarding the proof of certitude, he says,

I think it enough to appeal to the common voice of mankind in proof of it. That is to be accounted a normal operation of our nature, which men in general do actually instance. ... Our hoping is a proof that hope, as such, is not an extravagance; and our possession of certitude is a proof that it is not a

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5 Newman's phrase has a peculiar etymology, one that bears explanation. "Latus" is the perfect past participle of the word "Ferro" - "to carry over." Hence, Latus means "to have been carried over," and the Latin term "illatio" was commonly used in classical logic for "inference." (E.g., "A particulare ad universale non valet illatio." All of which implies that Newman intends the illative sense to be understood as an inference - making sense that carries one over the gap from the conditional to the unconditional; from notional to real assent. (I am indebted to Albert Jansen for this insight.)

6 See Bockraad, p. 136.
weakness or an absurdity to be certain. How it comes about that we can be certain is not my business to determine; for me it is sufficient that certitude is felt" (270).

Newman took as a given what he observed in himself, and other selves; that individuals do feel certitude about propositions that are not demonstrable via rational, scientific or mathematical proofs. Newman begins by examining certitude because, beyond elementary points of knowledge — direct knowledge of self and the world:

[L]ies a vast subject-matter of opinion, credence, and belief, viz. the field of public affairs, of social and professional life, of business, of duty, of literature, of taste, may, of the experimental sciences. On subjects such as these the reasons and conclusions of mankind vary. — "It is the object of disputations of the court;" — and prudent men in consequence seldom speak confidently, unless they are warranted to do so by genius, great experience, or some special qualification (192).

The prudent man realizes that certitude is available in so few matters that he is always mindful of the degree of certainty proper to a given question. Newman demonstrates his own prudence by the care with which he explores the grounds of certitude in religious questions.

Regarding a popular maxim of the day, that "Probability is the guide of life," Newman further notes:

This saying, when properly explained, is true; however, we must not suffer ourselves to be led away by a true maxim to an extreme; it is far from true, if we so hold it as to forget that without first principles there can be no conclusions at all, and that thus probability does in some sense presuppose and require the existence of truths which are certain. Especially is the maxim untrue, in respect to the other great department of knowledge, the spiritual, if taken to support the doctrine, that the first principles and elements of religion, which are universally received; are mere matter of opinion. ... The initial truths of divine knowledge ought to be viewed as parallel to the initial truths of secular: as the latter are certain, so too are the former (192–3).

Newman makes a move, in both of the above quotations, that some would consider fairly radical: He extends the province of certainty to religious matters and, simultaneously, extends the realm of probability to the "experimental sciences." The critical distinction which legitimates Newman’s assertion is how he insists here that the nature of knowledge is such that inquirers have available to them "indefectible certitude in primary truths, manifold variations of opinion in their application and disposition" (194). There are, however, three defining traits of the indefectible certitude:

[1] That it follows on investigation and proof, that it is accompanied by a specific sense of intellectual satisfaction and repose, and that it is irreversible. If the assent is made without rational grounds, it is a rash judgment, a fancy, or a prejudice; if without the sense of finality, it is scarcely more than an inference; if without permanence, it is a mere conviction (207–8).

Genuine certitude is available to us only on a small class of fundamentals (or "initial truths"), and never in "gray" issues. So long as a given issue remains "gray" for an individual, he holds no certitude with regards to that issue. It is this recognition of the limits of certitude that prompt "prudent men" to seldom speak confidently, and, prudent ones further understand that "They neither can possess, nor need certitude, nor do they look out for it" (192). It takes courage to confront life with the expectation of certitude in only those areas suggested by Newman above.

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Nonetheless, experience shows that people do hold certitudes about matters that the rationalists of Newman’s day would deem logically impossible. Newman’s starting point for his defense of certitude in contingent matters is a common sense account of certitude itself. This will, of course, be a bone of contention for the logician; common sense is too unsafe. Still, unsafety as his starting point may be, the question remains: Is Newman’s account plausible?

Consider how the potentially endless parade of particulars, in which any given case consists, demands so very many preliminary lines of inquiry before judgment can be rendered. The circumstances in a given case are potentially limitless; the interpretation of the motives of key individuals in a given case is potentially limitless; the relevance of certain facts, the combinations of all these factors, and so on, and so on ad infinitum. If the rules of logical investigation were the only tool by which judgments were made, how would one manage such infinitesimal multiplicity? Whether the rules of logic, ramifying would have no end. Hence, Newman’s profound assertion: "the human mind in its present [earthly] state is unequal to its own powers of apprehension; it embraces more than it can master" (Harrold, 15–16). I am capable of apprehending relevant features (and the fact of their relevance) much more quickly than I am able to articulate them. In much the same way that, in order to avoid stating the obvious, a rhetor need not articulate every premise of a given clysmene, articulating every relevant feature of a given case is the very definition of pedantry. My own apprehension of the relevance of certain subtle features of the case at hand suffices to warrant their consideration, and practical wisdom permits me to not account for each of them (for the sake of rendering judgment in a timely fashion). In short, some "apprehensions" can be taken for granted. Because it requires that all "links" in the chain of argument be explicitly demonstrated, "verbal argumentation is simply ill-suited to the demands of managing particulars in real, concrete cases. But, "Life is for action. If we insist on proofs for every thing, we shall never come to action: to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith" (91). Or, to cast it in a less radical formulation, a given controversy:

[1] is carried on from starting-points, and with collateral aids, not formally proved, but more or less assumed, the process of assumption lying in the action of the Illative Sense, as applied to primary elements of thought respectively congenial to the disputants. Not that explicit argumentation on these minute or minor, though important, points is not sometimes possible to a certain extent; but, as I have said, it is too unwieldy an expedient for a constantly recurring need, even when it is tolerably exact (290).

What may be called Newman’s “quasi-epistemology” of certitude in the contingent realm, rests on his common sense account of certitude. (I say “quasi-epistemology” because Newman never conducts an epistemological inquiry qua epistemology). Newman discusses assent before fully developing his quasi-epistemology of certitude, because he defines certitude as a “complex assent.”

Inference vs. Assent

There are three ways of holding or entertaining a proposition: Doubt, Inference, and Assent. "A question is the expression of a doubt; a conclusion is the expression of an act of inference; and an assertion is the expression of an act of assent" (26.) Newman distinguishes between inference and assent by noting that, “while the keenness of the ratiocinative faculty enables a man to see the ultimate result of a complicated problem in a moment, it takes years for him to embrace it as a truth.
and to recognize it as an item in the circle of his knowledge. Yet he does at last so accept it, and then we say that he assents" (143). Contrasting assent and inference was critical because he had to refute the doctrine popularized by Locke, that there are degrees of assent. Why, because, by logical necessity, if the degree of assent appropriate to a given proposition is necessarily tied to the correlative veracity of its proofs, then the answer to Newman’s primary question (about certitude in conditional matters) is “impossible.” That is, by definition, — as Locke held — assents in conditional matters will always be conditional. Yet, according to Newman, common experience contradicts such “paper logic.”

When, then, philosophers lay down principles, on which it follows that our assent, except when given to objects of intuition or demonstration, is conditional, ... are they not to be considered as confusing together two things very distinct from each other, a mental act or state and a scientific rule, an inferior assent and a set of logical formulas (150)?

One criterion of Newman’s distinction seems to be a sense of immediacy; one sort of assent an immediate apprehension, while another type entails conscious reflection over time. Hence, Newman proposes another distinction; between simple and complex assents. Simple assent is an immediate, direct, unconscious and mechanical operation of mind. “I know that I know” that I exist, that there is existence beyond myself, that that existence (the universe) is intelligible, and so on. These are numerous, but not objects of conscious reflection; this is Assent Proper. Complex (or reflex) assent is a Certitude; i.e., “the perception of a truth with the perception that it is a truth” (163). Newman defines certitude as the sense that I am “right with a consciousness of being right.” (181) and such conscious apprehension comes only through reflection, and over time. Otherwise, it amounts to no more than a prejudice or an act of inference.

Newman reiterates the above distinction at a later point in the Grammar: “Certitude is a mental state; certainty is a quality of propositions” (271). This second criterion for his distinction means that certitude is a subjective perception about the truth of a proposition and certainty is an objective statement about the truth value of a proposition. In other words, to harken the Aristotelian taxonomy, only demonstrative propositions admit of certainty — it is that quality of such propositions which is achieved through necessity. Nonetheless, one can achieve certitude from propositions that do not admit of such certainty, and that “mental state” Newman calls complex assent or certitude. Certitude is gained through reflection, over time, on a number of converging probabilities, facts, and even intuitions. To harken Coulson, certitude is “acquired gradually, step by step, and is not an immediate certainty.”

However, not everything goes for Newman. He argues that words like “suspicion, conjecture, presumption, persuasion, belief, conclusion, conviction, moral certainty.”

[Are not “assents” at all; they are simply more or less strong inferences of a proposition.... There is only one sense in which we are allowed to call such acts or states of mind assents. They are opinions; and, as being such, they are, as I have already observed, when speaking of Opinion, assents to the plausibility, probability, doubtfulness, or untrustworthiness, of a

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proposition; that is, not variations of assent to an inference, but assents to a variation in inferences (147).

Here is a subtle and significant point; one that deserves closer attention. In Newman’s taxonomy, opinion denotes “an assent, but an assent to a proposition, not as true, but as probably true, that is, to the probability of that which the proposition enunciates; and as that probability may vary in strength without limit, so may the cogency and moment of the opinion” (64). The “variation in inferences” mentioned above is identical to Newman’s use of probability here. The impact of this critical distinction, is twofold: (1) Certitude never varies (it is “indefectible”) and (2) Truth is always one. In other words, opinions are not assents to the truth of a proposition, but assents to the likelihood, or probability of its truth value. Hence, when I say, “X is probably true,” I do not imply that there is such a thing as a degree of truth, X is either true or it is not, but, unless X is demonstrable. I offer only my opinion about the probability that X is true. Newman likewise claims indefectibility for certitudes: True certitude is (contra Locke) not a matter of degree. If I appear to have less than absolute certitude about the truth of a given proposition, it is because it lacks a strong probability of being certainly true. The full impact of the distinction between opinion and assent — and its key presupposition regarding probability — is felt until the section in Chapter Eight entitled “Informal Inference”.

Informal inference is an operation of mind that is, for the most part, unanalyzable. In order to understand (in part) informal inference, it is necessary first to grasp the fundamental distinction between “real” and “notional,” because informal inference is both the basis of real assent and the means by which real apprehension consummates in correct belief.

Notional vs. Real

Newman classifies propositions that deal with abstractions, “notional” and he denotes “real” those which have to do with things. Apprehension is synonymous with interpretation, and it is of two kinds: notional and real. Thus, assent can be considered “apprehensive.” It is possible for a single proposition to admit of both notional and real interpretations; it can contain both aspects. Furthermore, notional assents can, over time, turn into real assents; by means of contemplation and experience.

Without the apprehension of notions, we should for ever pace round one small circle of knowledge; without a firm hold upon things, we shall waste ourselves in vague speculations. However, real apprehension has the precedence, as being the scope and end and the test of notional; and the fuller is the mind’s hold upon things what it considers such, the more fertile is it in its aspects of them, and the more practical in its definitions (47).

Real apprehension is facilitated by imagination and, through vivacity, gains the power that gives it the precedence over notional apprehension. Newman says it best when he writes, “The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description” (89). Thus, a real assent has the combined linguistic “power” and rhetorical force to carry one to certitude in a probability. All of the above components, taken together, constitute an unorthodox view of persuasion.

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Articulating the prospects for and usefulness of alternative forms of reasoning is an important facet of the rhetorician’s avocation today. While it is true that many philosophers acknowledge the limits of abstract philosophy, the acquired habit of inquiry usually takes the day when it comes to rendering judgments in real cases. Many philosophers still hold the rationalist’s bias regarding the degree of rigor obtainable in moral inquiries through the application of formal reasoning. For them, the only genuine proof is one that is derived by rule, that is internally consistent, and universalizable. The situation today is, perhaps, less caustic than a hundred years ago; nobody argues today that informal modes of inquiry are “sins against the human intellect.” Nonetheless, bias remains and informal modes of reasoning are often deemed “non-rigorous.” Newman’s epistemology suggests a way to combat this rationalistic bias, but, in order to fully appreciate the novelty of his approach, let us now compare it with another, more familiar one.

Aristotle on Demonstrative vs. Dialectical Reasoning

I here refer to Aristotle’s distinction between dialectical and demonstrative reasoning in order to offer a variation on the theme of Newman’s epistemological distinction; a distinction that legitimizes the role of informal inference in the moral sphere. This comparison is felicitous because Newman’s epistemology presupposes Aristotle’s.

In the *Topics*, Aristotle identifies four types of inference: (1) the *philosopheme* which is a demonstrative inference, (2) the *epichireme* which is a dialectical inference, (3) the *sophism* which is a contentious inference, and (4) the *apophasis* which is an inference that reasons dialectically to a contradiction (*Topics* 162a 15–19). Note how these four classifications of inference imply that reasoning other than demonstrative is either dialectical or contentious. Although Aristotle identifies four types of inference there are only two modes of inference: demonstrative and dialectical. The relevance of these distinctions to the current inquiry is suggested by the famous line, (a line of which Newman was himself fond) “it is much the same mistake to put up with a mathematician using probabilities, and to require demonstration of an orator.” That aphorism is based on Aristotle’s axiom that one not insist on more precision than the nature of a subject admits.8 In other words, abstraction is suitable for treating some questions, but not all. Dialectical reasoning is apropos where more precision (hence, less abstraction) is called for. A second important axiom is: One must, likewise, not assert more certainty than the nature of the subject admits. Some questions admit of a high degree of certainty; others do not. So then, demonstrative reasoning is apropos when a high degree of certainty is available. On this point Newman adds to Aristotle. Newman wants to account for the equation in the realm of moral inquiry; the realm of dialectical inference or *epichireme*. More of that later; our focus here is on the other half of the equation: how they both agree that demonstrative reasoning is ill-suited to moral inquiry.

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8 “[The educated person seeks exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of the subject allows; for apparently it is just as mistaken to demand demonstrations from a rhetorician as to accept [nearly] persuasive arguments from a mathematician” (Nicomachean Ethics, 1096b 25).

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Why exactly is demonstrative reasoning ill-suited to moral inquiry? Because its need for absolute formal consistency renders it ineffective as a means for approaching questions that, by definition, hold in tension conflicting values and interests. In order to approach contingent questions with scientific or abstract knowledge, one would have to impose both less precision and more certainty than the nature of such cases admit. Or, in Newman’s words:

The concrete matter of propositions is a constant source of trouble to syllogistic reasoning, as marring the simplicity and perfection of its process. Words, which denote things, have innumerable implications; but in inferential exercises it is the very triumph of that clearness and hardness of head . . . to have stripped them of all these connatural senses, to have drained them of that depth and breadth of associations which constitute their poetry, their rhetoric, and their historical life, to have starved each term down till it has become the ghost of itself, and everywhere one and the same ghost, “omnibus umbra locutus” so that it may stand for just one unreal aspect of the concrete thing to which it properly belongs, for a relation, a generalization, or other abstraction, for a notion neatly turned out of the laboratory of the mind, and sufficiently tame and subdued, because existing only in a definition (214–15).

Inasmuch as rationalists seek after abstract rules and principles, they demand both less precision and more certainty than the nature of moral inquiry admits. Rationalism conflates the distinctions between the positive and contingent realms which encourages approaching moral progress with more certainty than the nature of the subject admits.

To return to the point I laid aside a moment ago: Do such distinctions require a pro forma denial of the logical possibility of certitude in the contingent realm? The rationalists of Newman’s day respond emphatically in the affirmative. Newman, however, accounts for certitude in the moral realm, (thus adding to Aristotle), as noted above, by explicating the relationship between probability and certitude. The problem comes to this: common experience says that people experience certitude in moral questions, and that, on the one hand, conventional wisdom says that certitude is only attainable from necessary premises; on the other: it says that the only mode of reasoning whereby certitude is available is *demonstrative*. But that will not do because, as both Newman and Aristotle show, it is inappropriate to attempt such demonstrations in the moral realm; we have need of another “instruments of reasoning.” Moral reasoning, by its very nature, is more a matter of *praxis* and *phronesis* than of *episteme* and *sophia*. Newman observes of ordinary, informal reasoning that:

> It is the cumulation of probabilities, independent of each other, arising out of the nature and circumstances of the particular case which is under review; probabilities too fine to avail separately, too subtle and circumspect to be convertible into syllogisms, too numerous and various for such conversion, even were they convertible (230).

In short, a single probability cannot lead to a certitude. Aristotle and Newman would both agree on that proposition. However, Newman shows how a number of strong probabilities can, and do, converge to culminate in certitude. Even then, it is important to bear in mind how, as I noted above, Newman does not teach that certitude is an *immediate* outcome of converging probabilities; he does not argue that certitude happens the same way conclusions are reached in syllogisms. Complex assents are reflexive; a true certitude is the result of the combination of probabilities (in addition to other — even demonstrative — proofs) coming
However, we ought not underestimate the importance of reappropriating Newman’s doctrine regarding the limitations of logic, because the revival of rhetorical reason in our time is, to a large degree, dependent on our ability to break the hegemony of rationalism.

Walter Jost turns the tables on those who argue that Newman is no “real” philosopher. Jost affirms that Newman was a not a “real” philosopher, “if by ‘real philosopher’ we expect to find in Newman exact definitions, systematic unfolding of concepts, and proofs fashioned sub specie aeternitatis” like Descartes or Spinoza (Jost, 7). Newman’s goal was to show his peers that there was a different “game in town,” and that his was superior because the scientism of the rationalist is “inadequate to the richness of our experience and to the language we require to express it” (Jost, 76). The following analogy from the Grammar is the best commentary on Jost’s remark. Rationalists contemplate

[ ] How representative symbols work, not how the intellect is affected towards the thing which those symbols represent. In real truth they as little mean to assert the principle of measuring our assents by our logic, as they would fancy they could record the refreshment which we receive from the open air by the readings of the graduated scale of a thermometer. There is a connection between a logical conclusion and an assent, as there is between the variation of the mercury and our sensations; but the mercury is not the cause of life and health, nor is verbal argumentation the principle of inward belief.

... It is the mind that reasons and assents, not a diagram on paper (150–51).

It is not as though Newman esteemed logical inconsistency. He was, rather, put out by a priori reasoning that flies in the face of “the facts” — ordinary experience. Verbal argumentation, or the science of Logic, was too rigid, too insensitive to circumstances (because too abstract) to be of use in concrete matters, and yet, Logic held the presumption (at least for rationalists) in Newman’s day. Newman’s rhetorical strategy for subverting that presumption is noteworthy.

Since no tough-minded rationalist can countenance inconsistency, Newman illustrates how moral judgments, tyrannized by the rule of logic, necessarily lead to inconsistencies. What is the source of that inconsistency? It is not endemic to rationalism, per se. The rationalists create their own dilemma by committing what Alfred North Whitehead called the “Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness.” That is, they “allowed only formal argumentation as a source of truly valuable knowledge” (Boekrad, 174). Newman demonstrates the shortcomings of their unmethod by pointing out that, when confronted with the difficulties of making judgments in hard cases, logicians ignore their own prescriptions.

Though Newman is an imperial intellect, he is not imperialistic. He does not claim exclusivity for his own method, but merely attempts to show how formal and informal logic complement one another. He avoids the fallacy of misplaced concreteness (or, to coin a phrase [à la Bacon] “the Idol of Intellectual Imperialism”) by arguing for a vision of the whole. What he insists on is that, insofar as his contemporaries were more interested in disputatio and analyticity than in inquiry and practical wisdom, they were more concerned with concluding rightly than with right conclusions; with validity rather than truth; and with the general rather than the concrete. What is more, I will argue, Newman’s strategy is still apropos to the degree that this generation has inherited the Cartesian animadversion. 10

How is the Grammar an Aid to Conceptualizing Rhetorical Reason?

The task of defending the status of and uses for alternative forms of reasoning is one of tantamount importance to rhetoricians today, and, as I mentioned earlier, the question of rigor is at the heart of this matter. Newman’s Grammar shows precisely how some important questions simply do not admit of demonstration. What then constitutes legitimate rigor in such instances? Rationalists maintain that true rigor is achieved by one of two means: logical necessity or empirical demonstration. Since questions involving concrete cases admit of neither, the only recourse for the rationalist is to throw up his hands and conclude that “one simply cannot make value judgments.” Newman argues persuasively that serious people have not that option. Reflection on common experience testifies that real people make use of judgments on a daily basis, and they are not arbitrary. For all the reasons cited above, Newman’s “instrument” provides the degree of rigor appropriate to the nature of moral questions.

Rhetorical reasoning is an offshoot of dialectical inference operant in real cases. Newman shows how, in concrete (or particular) cases, under the care of the illative sense, probabilities converge and can, over time, generate a certainty. Here lies the strongest link between Newman’s illative sense and rhetoric. Insofar as rhetoric relies for its force on probability, rhetorical inquiry relies upon Newman’s illative sense for its efficacy. Rhetorical reason helps mitigate the problems of moral inquiry by providing as much rigor as the nature of judgments about such questions will admit. Phronesis, by virtue of its concomitant concern with both principles and particulars, assures that the level of rigor is, in fact, appropriate. Phronesis and rhetoric are closely allied, and, by virtue of Newman’s conceptualization of the illative sense, rhetoricians gain valuable insight into strategies for accentuating both the relevance of and the need for rhetorical modes of reasoning.

Newman’s common-sense account of how converging probabilities result in certainty also lends clarity to recent scholarly developments in rhetorical inquiry. The epistemology that sanctions the illative sense, with its attendant critique of formal logic, constitutes a real contribution to rhetorical theory. Rhetoricians have never fleshed out that epistemology in such detail. Newman uniquely details the underpinnings of the illative sense by focusing on the distinction between demonstrative and dialectical reasoning, the role of probabilities in moral certainty, the limits of logic and the variety of mental operations. The importance of this contribution, in light of Aristotle’s observation that rhetoric is an offshoot of both dialectic and ethics, is clear. Newman contributes to a methodology of rhetorical reasoning by sketching how the individual mind works when engaged in moral inquiry (i.e., by informal inference and, through the illative sense, deriving certitudes as probabilities converge). Another interesting concern of

together, over time, to confirm one another. Newman’s doctrine of probabilities goes a long way toward articulating the methodology of rhetorical reasoning. Rhetorical reason, as a species of dialectical inference, operates in the contingent realm; which is to say that its primary concern is with probable truth. By way of analogy, then, all of these various insights regarding moral development and beliefs in the moral realm are applicable to rhetoric.

**Probability: Common Denominator Between Ethics and Rhetoric**

Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* begins with the observation that enthymemes “are the substance of rhetorical persuasion” (1354a 15), and that an enthymeme is “a syllogism starting from probabilities” (Prior Analytics 70a 10). A syllogism, on the other hand, is “discourse in which certain things being stated, something other than what is stated follows of necessity from their being so” (Pr. Anal. 2a 1b 20).

Syllogisms entail logical necessity; the conclusion — which is unstated — is derived, necessarily (and instantaneously), from “what is stated” — the premises, and true premises are statements of necessary truth (such as “All men are mortal”).

Aristotle defines “probability” variously in both the *Rhetoric* and in the *Prior Analytics* (to which he refers the reader of the *Rhetoric* for a fuller treatment). In the *Analytics* he describes probability as “a generally approved proposition: what men know to happen or not to happen, to be or not to be, for the most part thus and thus, is a probability, e.g. ‘the envious hate’, ‘the beloved show affection’” (70a 2). So then, a probability is based on non-necessary truth; it is true, but only for the most part, or usually true as opposed to always and necessarily true.

One of the most interesting moves in the *Rhetoric*, along these lines, is when Aristotle counsels the plaintiff with no witness on his side to: “Argue that the judges must decide from what is probable; that this is meant by ‘giving a verdict in accordance with one’s honest opinion’; that probabilities cannot be bribed to mislead the court; and that probabilities are never convicted of perjury” (137a 17–21). A latter allusion to this same line of argument amplifies its relevance to our inquiry: “Any argument based upon what usually happens is always open to objection; otherwise it would not be a probability but an invariable and necessary truth” and judges “ought to decide by considering not merely what must but also what is likely to be true” (1402b 29f). That is to say, sound decisions are made on the basis of necessary, demonstrable truth as well as of contingent or probable.

A further ramification of Aristotle’s position is that probabilities can be more reliable than direct testimony. When it comes to giving or (considered from the other point of view) gaining assent, weighty probabilities, combined with other relevant facts, demonstrations, examples and testimony all converge to achieve persuasion. It is this sense of probability that Newman emphasizes, and understanding his emphasis complements one’s understanding of his methodology of rhetorical reasoning.

By “converging probabilities” Newman means, probable reasons viewed in their convergence and combination. These constitute a “real, reasonable, but not argumentative, [syllogistic] proof” such that a certitude is derived from them (260). As they converge, these probabilities confirm and check one another. Certitude is based on an implicit, complex act of judgment focused on these probabilities in their convergence over time; it is necessarily complex for all the reasons detailed above. Reading Newman’s *Grammar* in this way affords one a conception of the methodology of rhetorical reason that relies on:

- A common-sense account of certitude.
- Distinctions between certitude/certainty and between notional/real.
- A robust grasp of the relationship between probability and certitude.
- The distinction between demonstrative and dialectical inference.
- The subtle working of the illative sense over time.

Newman demonstrates the methodology of rhetorical reason by a series of examples too numerous and complex to here elucidate. In short, the methodology he exemplifies is the active mind, habituated to operate in the matrix framed by the five precepts above, “brooding” over relevant aspects of a concrete case, identifying and discriminating between the issues at stake, considering various combinations of facts and probabilities; assenting to some, rejecting others, and, in due season, arriving at a number of “indecidable” certitudes. This characterization evokes certain images that prompt me to assert, as I did earlier on, that Newman’s conception emphasizes the “spirit” or movement of rhetorical reasoning. Newman’s account is by no means straightforward, but, apparently, it suits his purposes.

Perhaps Newman’s account fails to satisfy; then again, perhaps in so concluding, he presages the sagacity of Richard Weaver, to the effect that “Rhetoric moves the soul with a movement which cannot finally be justified logically.” He approximates Weaver’s sentiment when he declares that: “After all, man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal. He is influenced by what is direct and precise. It is very well to freshen our impressions and convictions from physics, but to create them we must go elsewhere” (90). Of course such desiderata can be offered as irrefutable proof of Newman’s (and Weaver’s) anti-intellectualism. However, taken in context, they should be read as a declaration of Newman’s image of “the whole man.” Weaver, again, reflects a similar vision of human nature:

When all factors have been considered, it will be seen that men are born rhetoricians, though some are born small ones and others greater, and some cultivate the native gift by study and training, whereas some neglect it. Men are such because they are born into history, with an endowment of passion and a sense of the ought. There is ever some discrepancy, however slight, between the situation man is in and the situation he would like to realize. His life is therefore characterized by movement toward goals. It is largely the power of rhetoric which influences and governs that movement (Language Is Sermonic, 221).

Human beings are rhetorical because it is their nature to act on passions guided by reason. To argue that the only legitimate method of persuasion is the appeal to logic is to advance a denatured, cerebro-centric image of man.

Still, one ought to treat seriously questions about Newman’s status as a philosopher. Does Newman’s insistence that formal yield to informal inference in matters of belief actually amount to anti-intellectualism?

**Newman’s Critique of Formal Logic**

Newman’s critique of formal reason follows from and is largely anticipated in all that has been established above. For that reason, this movement will be brief.
a methodology of rhetorical reasoning has less to do with individual moral growth as with conceptualizing the instrument of inquiry by which a group discovers the crux of a given moral dilemma.

Had Newman also detailed the components of a method of shared inquiry his work would have been an even more complete contribution.\textsuperscript{11} Here is the precise entree for taking the conceptualization of rhetorical reasoning in a more rhetorical (i.e., more communal and more praxis-oriented) direction. Conceptualizing rhetoric as an instrument of moral inquiry entails all the following: topical logic, stastic doctrine, sensitivity to maxims, case-centeredness and phronesis. Newman's grammar is an excellent study of informal reasoning processes akin to phronesis, but more attention to the instrumental aspect of the method — one that focuses on the discovery aspect of rhetorical inquiry — would round out Newman's conception by addressing the question: How does rhetorical reasoning function as a guide to groups attempting to render judgments in actual moral dilemmas? The medical ethics committee is the prime example of such a group. Medical practitioners are faced with moral dilemmas on a daily basis. They must decide: Is it yet time to withdraw life support? Are these courses of treatment warranted given the amount of suffering this patient will endure? Is this family's wish actually in the best interest of the patient? Practitioners, when pressed, must answer, "I believe we did the right thing in this case," but one cannot assert that one has concluded rightly in a mathematical or logically necessary sense in such contingent matter. As Newman would say, ethics committees need "a more subtle instrument" to guide their judgment in such cases. This essay lays the groundwork for such a methodology of rhetorical reasoning.\textsuperscript{12}

Stephen Toulmin's Cosmopolis: the Hidden Agenda of Modernity shows how Cartesian rationalism errs when it derogates the oral, particular, local, timely, and concrete in favor of the abstract and universal. In this sense, at least one facet of post-modernism can be viewed as a rhetorical revolution; as the critique of modernity brings rationalism into a measure of balance, rhetoric will be revalued as a means of inquiry into concrete questions which resist formal demonstration. Newman merits attention because he justifies the method of informal inference without rejecting formal logic: prudence requires that, in the process of breaking the hegemony of rationalism, we follow Newman's lead and avoid worship at the idol of Intellectual Imperialism.

James M. Tallmon
Communication Studies & Theatre
South Dakota State University

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