

Dedication to the Truth: Newman's Philosophy and Theology of Education

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Abstract

The main thesis of this article is that Newman's philosophy of education can only be understood within his Christian vision of the nature and vocation of humankind. That vision included a deep appreciation for real dialogue and human encounter at the very heart of education as well as an equally profound understanding of the deep complexity and inter-relation of all areas of knowledge including that of theology among the many subjects taught at university. For Newman, education, like truth, must result in wisdom and positive action as well as more intellectual and theoretical advances. Real education informs the intellect as well as forming the moral heart of the person. We may learn all the knowledge available to us, but we must also be agents of that knowledge by acting morally for the wellbeing of our fellow human beings, that is, in Newman's language, to be able to marry our doctrine (knowledge) with our devotion to action and prayer (spirituality).

Keywords

head; heart; reason; faith; dialogue; the gentleman; universal knowledge; truth; multidisciplinary

Introduction

We live in deeply uncertain and troubling times. Public debate is too often drawn to the extremes of ultra-right and ultra-left by way of inflammatory comments on social platforms, and much of this often results in public disorder and destruction. Dialogue that engages both head and heart, or both intellect and respect for the other, is sorely lacking. John Henry Newman (1801–1890), knew well that real dialogue involves what he termed 'the whole man,' (Newman 1959, 225) which undoubtedly, if he had lived in modern not Victorian times, he would have expressed in more inclusive terms as 'the whole person.' For him the head and heart had to move together. In other words, his theology and philosophy were the results of deep and prayerful reflection on his lived experience. It was this turn to experience, or in other words, this personalist approach, bolstered by both his knowledge of the Christian tradition and his painstaking scholarship, that led many to attest that Newman was the 'invisible peritus' of Vatican II (Cross 2006, 5), 'peritus' being a newly-coined term from the Latin, first used during Vatican II for an expert theologian or canon lawyer who advised their bishops on points of doctrine and church law. In other words, such was the influence of Newman's thought on Vatican II that he acquired this much-used attribution.

If one is to understand Newman's theology and his philosophy, a necessary requirement is to get to know 'the whole man' that he was, and this requires us to read his illuminating memoir *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. In that memoir, he set forth both his philosophical and theological anthropology as well as giving a deep insight into the process of his conversion, a spiritual experience closely allied with the development of his academic thoughts. Likewise, his philosophy and theology of education can only be understood and appreciated within the context of this comprehensive approach to the nature and meaning of human life, which for him can only be fully understood through a theological anthropology that sees every human being as a potentially graced recipient of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. (Newman 1908, 217).

1. Centrality of Dialogue in Life and in Education

Newman possessed a most astute and comprehensive mind and a sensitive and open personality. For him, dialogue was the only human way forward in any disputatious context. Furthermore, true education could only proceed by way of dialogue, a central tenet of his educational philosophy. Deeply schooled in the Greek philosophers and the Latin and Greek Fathers of the church, he had a subtle, nuanced and fine style that mirrored a mind open to wherever the truths of his faith and intellect were to lead him. In his finely argued epistemology, no two truths could contradict each other: for example, no truth in science, properly understood, could contradict any tenet of faith, properly assimilated.

It is significant to note that Newman had experienced the abandonment of belief close to home: his younger brother, Charles, had become sceptical and had given up religious belief early in life and by today's standards appears to have had some kind of mental illness. Graves (2023), a research scholar at the National Institute for Newman Studies, calls Charles (1802–1884) the 'black sheep' of the Newman family as a result of her studies of the Cardinal's private letters. His second brother Francis (1805–1897) was completely unorthodox in his beliefs, changing his religious stance very often in life, professing to be a deist at one point and an agnostic and Unitarian at other times, but he was also a scholarly professor in his own right and published much. Ker (1980, 199–200) gives a fulsome account of John Henry's robust arguments with Frank mainly because the latter's liberal principles would "lead to scepticism on all points whatever." Consequently, Newman (1978, 219) began in his early twenties to think seriously about the questions of agnosticism and unbelief. It was his arguments with his brothers that led him to one of his most incisive and abiding conclusions that "the rejection of Christianity" arises "from a fault of the heart, not of the intellect," since a "dislike of the contents of the Scripture is at the bottom of unbelief." Right up until the end of his life John Henry kept up correspondence with his brother Francis with regard to the provision of money to care for their sickly brother Charles (Graves 2023). These dialogues, mostly through letters, led Newman to listen to and empathise with the viewpoints of others, even if he could not share their opinions or beliefs. Surely, such an openness to listening to others, while at the same time not being shy to state one's own deeply held convictions, must be a hallmark of all good education.

2. The Complexity of the Person

From his experience of life, Newman (1892, 61) was deeply conscious that our permanent convictions and beliefs are reached, not by the intellect alone, but by the whole person functioning as a thinking, feeling and willing unity. This he called our ‘compound nature.’ He found it simply impossible to be a reductionist, to think otherwise than in a continual reference to the whole. In all his writings, Newman was continually aware of the partial character of his viewpoint on any specific subject. As the late Belgian theologian Jan Walgrave (1960, 7) put it: “he is possessed by a longing for the concrete ‘whole’ that eludes expression. He cannot prevent his intuition disturbing the course of his abstract disquisition.” Newman (1959, 178) was passionately insistent on this basic vision throughout his long life, as is evidenced especially in the *Apologia*. Therein, he insists that in any controversy in which he was involved that he “had a great impatience, whatever was the subject, of not bringing out the whole of it, as clearly as I could.”

This concern of Newman’s to see all sides of a problem, “to bring out the whole of it,” as he put it, could lead to many misunderstandings and misrepresentations, but also it was a wise course in the long term as it invited on-going dialogue which could lead to better solutions to more intractable problems. Watkin (1958, 191) puts it succinctly by stating that Newman was “a man of balance, who could not see every question black or white, distrustful of extremes, sensitive to the intellectual difficulties, felt not only by non-Catholics, but by Catholics whose minds were not hermetically closed against the contemporary environment.” In other words, Newman’s approach to finding the truth in any situation must necessarily involve consultation and mediation. No wonder he was acknowledged as the ‘invisible peritus’ of Vatican II where many debates were fraught with heavy theological and controversial argumentation. Truly, Newman, is an educator open to finding middle ground in all things, a path where reason and faith can walk hand in hand. Such dialogue can and should exist in our classrooms and lecture halls.

3. Newman, Liberalism and Liberal Education

One of Newman’s greatest fears, in the wake of the incursions of Enlightenment thinking into society at large, was, as he termed it, ‘Liberalism,’ a designation he usually capitalised. However, his use of the expression was substantially different to how we define it today. In short, it was Newman’s term for rationalism, which even existed within the Christian Church itself – where everything was reduced to being studied from a very narrow understanding of reason and reason alone. Newman (1965, 97–98) had defined liberalism in the *Apologia* as “a false liberty of thought, or the exercise of thought upon matters, in which, from the constitution of the human mind, thought cannot be brought to any successful issue.” His biographer Ian Ker (1988, 721) underscores the fact that Newman stressed in his *biglietto* speech on elevation to the cardinalate that all his life’s work was inspired by his desire to combat liberalism or unrestrained reductionist reason.

However, with regards to education, Newman uses the word ‘liberal’ entirely in a different and unique way, and this can add to much confusion. In fact, not being a systematic theologian, he often uses several terms in diverse ways. Speaking at a recent conference, Ian Ker (2019), perhaps the foremost Newman scholar of more recent times, stated: “Newman declared that Philosophy should be at the heart of university education. In a way it is his own fault because he speaks about philosophy with a capital P. What did Newman mean by liberal education, this has been much misunderstood ... [He] does not mean the academic subject we now call philosophy... what he is saying with special philosophy is the ability to think, a real cultivation of the mind.” He continued, “When Newman speaks about liberal education he isn’t speaking about the liberal arts ... it [is] any subjects that could encourage students to think.” And theology, the Queen of the Sciences (Hartley 2024) was also one of those subjects that would certainly encourage them to think.

4. Two Levels of Reasoning

The subtlety and originality of Newman’s thought can be seen clearly in any of the *University Sermons* (1826–1843) where he speaks of man’s spontaneous reasoning which is largely ‘implicit’ or ‘unconscious’. In other words, ‘implicit reason’ is unconscious of its own nature. In the sermon “Implicit and Explicit Reason,” he adverts to two distinct processes which commonly fall under the heading of reason: (i) the original or raw process of reasoning, and (ii) the later stage of investigating our reasonings. In Newman’s (1897, 258–259) own words: “We may denote, then, these two exercises of the mind as reasoning and arguing, or as unconscious and conscious reasoning, or as Implicit Reason and Explicit Reason.” In this sense Newman would have been pursuing his theology both at a ‘first level’ and at a ‘second level’ of reflection in the language of the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1978, 9) who goes so far as to mention Newman’s contribution to the justification of faith at the first level. Rahner would see this ‘first level of reflection’ as being both “scientifically ... and intellectually honest ... in its own right.” Another way of putting this would be to say that implicit reason operates at the level of primary or first order language, i.e., at the level of religious experience. As such, in Newman’s (1892, 259) own words, it includes “antecedent probability, analogy, parallel cases, testimony, and circumstantial evidence; and such states of mind as prejudice, deference to authority, party spirit, and the like.” Education, as a result, values reason as acting on a broad spectrum, and its real value lies in “enlargement of mind, or illumination.” (Newman 1976, 135)

As the reader will have gathered by now, the Cardinal was a man of great imagination, being a novelist, a poet, a hymn writer, a musician as well as a theologian and philosopher. In particular, Newman (1909, 92) vehemently defends his own view of man as more than a ‘reasoning animal’ in a merely logical or scientific sense. Human beings are made for action and moved by feeling, and in this context he says: “the heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination.” Likewise, a ‘real’ faith commitment, as opposed to a merely ‘notional’ adherence, will be characterised by the light of imagination, capable of piercing the heart. The ‘notional’ truth explored in theology always needs to be “appropriated as a reality,

by the religious imagination.” Let me appropriate this insight into ‘real’ as opposed to ‘notional’ faith for my purposes in this essay by saying that like faith, education must be both ‘notional’ (head) and ‘real’ (heart) if our students, teachers and lecturers are to grow in comprehensive knowledge and positive relationship.

5. The Idea of a University

The focus of this paper falls upon Newman’s philosophy and theology of education, worked out in response to Archbishop Paul Cullen’s (1803–1878) invitation in 1851 to establish a Catholic university in Dublin. Cullen was the first Irish Cardinal and was responsible for the Romanisation of the Irish Catholic Church. His interest in Catholic university education was more a partisan response to the British Government’s decision to establish a secular and non-denominational Queen’s University of Ireland, rather than a genuine interest in third level education *per se*. The Queen’s Colleges of Ireland were established in 1845, and the colleges so designated were to cater for all religious denominations. The Queen’s Colleges of Belfast, Cork and Galway finally opened their doors to students in October 1849. Newman’s Catholic University opened in November 1854 and its founder resigned almost four years later, having crossed the Irish Sea some fifty-six times in seven years in its service. However, the Archbishop, a dyed-in-the-wool Roman conservative, was deeply suspicious of Newman’s methods and caused the new rector much angst: the freedom he allowed the students, the appointment of laymen as professors and lecturers, and his proposed intellectual freedom for such an institution. (Hollis 1967, 118–119)

Čaja (2023, 18–24) rightly contends that Newman’s famous *Idea of a University* cannot be fully appreciated without acknowledging that it arose essentially as a reaction to and rejection of the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham. This philosopher, inspired by the *Principle of Utility*, regarded education as a prime vehicle for maximizing the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The utilitarian perspective on education thereafter focused on producing students who would be able to fit into society, fulfil its needs and ultimately fill its job quotas. In short, the student in this system of education was to be trained to be a productive citizen. This utilitarian perspective has been used for many years around the world as a formal schooling basis, and it could be argued that this happened and still happens with the intention of benefiting elite and wealthy individuals. However, Newman could never subscribe to such a principle for education. It is against this background that Newman set out his response to utilitarianism in his famous book on university education to which we now turn our attention. In *The Idea of a University*, Newman (1965, xxix) states that a university must be considered to be “a place of universal knowledge” and his guiding principle is, as he states in Discourse IV, that “all knowledge is a whole and the separate sciences part of one ... all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself – as being the great Creator and His work” (Newman 1965, 80). Therefore, if a university is to teach universal knowledge, it can omit theology only at its peril from its curriculum of studies: “A university, I should lay down, by its very nature professes to teach

universal knowledge: theology is surely a branch of knowledge: how then is it possible to profess all branches of knowledge, and yet to exclude not the meanest, nor the narrowest of its number.” (Newman 1965, 90) It is through the interplay of all these subjects and sciences that truth is explored and its boundaries enlarged. No one subject can be given undue prominence in the circle of sciences on the simple basis that in doing so it would be perpetrating an injustice on another.

In his lecture ‘Christianity and Scientific Investigation,’ Newman (1969, 229) makes a passionate plea to all academics, from whatever discipline, science, humanities or theology to have “a great and firm belief in the sovereignty of truth.” He goes on to point out that “error may flourish for a time, but truth will prevail in the end.” No two truths can contradict each other. They may seem to do so at first sight or in the immediate present, but later on through further study and investigation one realises that the contradiction was only apparent. “If he (the academic) has one cardinal maxim it is that truth cannot be contrary to truth” and all the while “we must be patient with such appearances and not be hasty to pronounce them to be really of a more formidable character.” (Newman 1969, 214)

In Discourse IV, Newman (Newman 1965, 88) gives the following definition of liberal education: “that alone is liberal knowledge which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be informed by an end.” Consequently, he excludes from his ideal university the teaching of any practical secular knowledge, useful or utilitarian training of any sort. However, he did make allowances for one practical area by founding a faculty of medicine at Cecilia Street. Such a philosophy of education inevitably led to much criticism, especially at a time in Ireland when professional men were desperately needed. Newman had gone to Dublin with no real interest in, and little understanding of, Irish problems or politics. The political and social dimensions of the Irish situation were of secondary importance to him. What interested him was the implanting into the Irish Catholic world of the Catholic university.

The most acute attack on Newman’s theory of liberal knowledge and on the inevitable dissociation of universal education from the pressure of social needs appears in Corcoran’s (1929, 10) introduction to a collection of Newman’s writings in education. Corcoran charged that Newman showed “a defectiveness of moral and intellectual vision as regards grave issues of social justice concerning educational rights and opportunities.” He went on to castigate him for focussing his educational philosophy chiefly on the moulding of a gentleman while money was collected from peasants to pay for it. (Corcoran 1929, 15)

However, in fairness to Newman, his task was the foundation of a University, with Victorian ideas of what a University should be, not the establishment of a Technical College or special schools for trades which might train Irishmen to save their country from depression and poverty. Dwight Culler (1955, 216–217) also takes Newman’s philosophy of liberal education to task in his monumental *The Imperial Intellect*. Therein, Culler charges that Newman contradicts himself. Did not Newman in effect assign a utilitarian end to a university in his moulding of a gentleman? He further charges that in the pursuit of liberal knowledge “as a kind of mental gymnastics, a mere exercise of the mind, are we not in danger of sacrificing the

power which knowledge has of placing us in communion with reality?” However, in answer to Culler, Vargish (1973, 130) correctly points out that Newman would stress that liberal knowledge is independent of, but is in no way irrelevant to, the improvement of society. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge does not lack a point of reference. Benefits to society in leadership, wisdom, the arts, in culture and in good citizenship do accrue from liberal knowledge.

Conclusion

In short, Newman’s educational aims were startlingly modern – he established scientific faculties, and the school of medicine became the most flourishing of all his foundations. Newman (1976, 197) had always insisted that a university is “not a convent, not a seminary; it is a place to fit men of the world for the world.” Hence, his famous definition of a gentleman at the end of the eighth discourse. – “[H]e is one who never inflicts pain... He has his eyes on all his company; he is tender towards the bashful, gentle towards the distant, and merciful towards the absurd; he can recollect to whom he is speaking; he guards against unseasonable allusions, or topics which may irritate; he is seldom prominent in conversation, and never wearisome. He makes light of favours while he does them and seems to be receiving when he is conferring.” In short, this quotation portrays some of the qualities of the ideal product of a university, apart altogether from religion. Again, let us be mindful that the gentleman does not represent his ultimate ideal of the human character – his ultimate ideal is the Christian, but that ideal lies beyond the scope of a university and falls within the remit of the Church.

Svobodová (2024, 1) underlines the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to education in the journal *Theology and Philosophy of Education*, and no greater apostle of such an approach, as early as in the nineteenth century, could be chosen than John Henry Cardinal Newman, a scholar some one hundred years before his time. As such, he is an ideal educationist and a most important promoter of ecumenism for modern times. Ireland, no more than any other European nation, is facing a growing crisis on the immigration front and, consequently our system of education must be one of welcome firstly, and secondly, one which expresses acceptance to students of all backgrounds in concrete actions. For Newman, truth results in practical knowledge, too: we may know the truth (doctrine), but we have to put it into action (spirituality). So, as teachers and lecturers, our greatest gift and task is to open the doors of universal knowledge to our students by encouraging their talents and indeed by caring for them through acting as would a gentleman. This will mean concrete actions on our part in keeping our office door open not alone to their intellectual enquiries but also, when and where feasible, to their pressing emotional and human needs. In doing so, we will be embracing the essence of Newman’s philosophy and theology of education.

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