

NEWMAN AND THE GRAMMAR OF ASSENT¹

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To Frederic Nef, who first set me to read Newman

Although quite famous in its own time, Cardinal Newman’s *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of assent* (1870²) is not much read today, at least by philosophers. Quite unjustly so, for it is one of the most important contributions to the epistemology of religious beliefs as well as a contribution to the epistemology of belief *simpliciter*. It is mainly under this latter aspect that I am interested in Newman’s work. For it bears upon some of the most fundamental questions of the philosophy of belief, such as: Is belief a passive state of mind, or an active one? Can it be under the influence of the will and how? Are beliefs dispositional of functional states, essentially related to action, or are they independent from it? Is believing a unified mental state, or is it a genus of which there are several kinds? Is belief a relationship to concrete entities, such as sentences, images or representations, or to abstract entities, such as propositions? Do beliefs have degrees? Can one believe in spite of the evidence, or even contrary to the evidence, or should we always proportionate our beliefs to our evidence? Is there a distinctive “ethics of belief” relative to our cognitive norms, and what is its

¹ NB This was an English draft of a paper given at the conference “analyse et théologie”, University of Nantes 1998 and published in French in R. Pouivet et B. Gnassounou, eds. *Analyse et théologie*, Paris, Vrin 2002

² I quote from the Longmans edition of 1903. There is a more recent edition of 1947, and a more recent one. For ease of reference, I shall mention the chapters and paragraphs.

relationship to our practical norms? These questions, and a number of others, are on the agenda of any philosophical account of belief. Newman attempts to answer a number of them, more or less explicitly. His aim is of course to use his discussion for a philosophical account of religious belief, to which he devotes two specific chapters (V and X) of his book. He is particularly interested in distinguishing simple faith from the theologian's faith. I shall not here dwell upon these questions, for lack of space and competence (and possibly concern). I shall only consider Newman's general analysis of belief and assent. I shall mainly deal with two particular, but central points in his analysis: his critique of Locke's doctrine about degrees of assent and his distinction between "real" and notional assent. The first point has to do with the kind of attitude a belief is, and whether it can be distinguished from another kind of attitude, which might properly be called "assent"; the other concerns the problem of the content of our beliefs. But the two, as we shall see, cannot really be separated. My aim is to argue that although Newman's distinctions are quite important for a philosophical account of belief, they are not without ambiguities and confusions, and that we have to recast them in a proper form.

1) NEWMAN'S TAXONOMY OF CREDAL ATTITUDES

One of the most striking features of Newman's analysis of belief in the *Essay*, for the contemporary reader, is that he does not talk so much about belief as he talks about "assent". Let us first try to describe, in a somewhat sketchy manner, his own taxonomy of what we may call "doxastic" or "credal" attitudes.

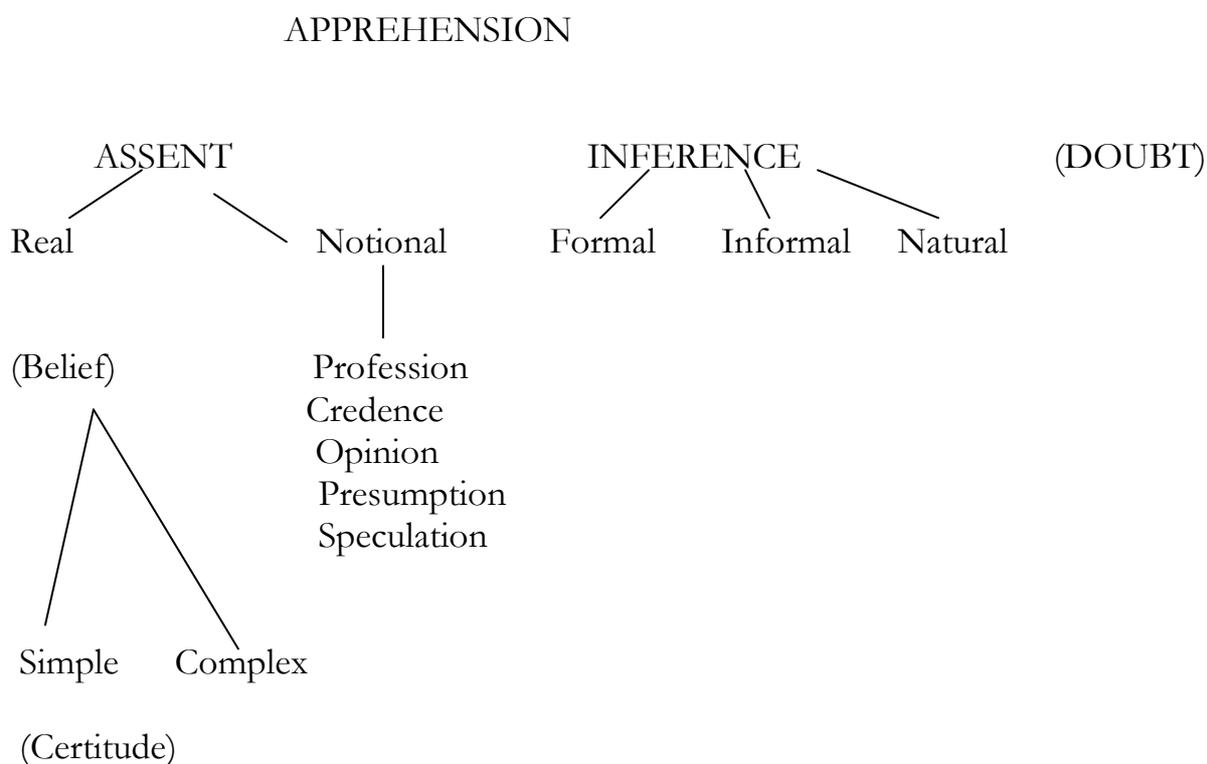
Actually, "Assent", for Newman, is the generic attitude of which belief is a species. In fact there is for him a more generic attitude than assent, which is the "holding of a proposition". And before one can hold a proposition, one must "apprehend it". By "proposition" Newman seems to mean both a concrete entity,

such as a written or spoken sentence, composed of a subject and a predicate (I.1), although he seems also to be prepared to say that we can apprehend propositions “mentally” (I.2). He does not distinguish, as we do today, between sentences as concrete linguistic entities and propositions as abstract entities as meanings of sentences. A proposition for him is just a sentence that is true or false. What he calls “apprehension” of a proposition is much the same as what we might call “entertaining” a proposition, that is considering it, without affirming it. Hence apprehending a proposition is not yet to hold it true, or, as Newman sometimes says, to accept it. Now, and it is one of his most important doctrines, Newman distinguishes two kinds of apprehension of propositions, “notional” and “real” apprehension. An apprehension is “real” if it is about a certain concrete thing, whether it exists or not; it is “notional” if it bears upon an abstract thing. Hence “real” should not be confused with “existent”; it means that there is a *res*, not that it is real). The contrast that Newman has in mind seems close to the distinction made by Hume between beliefs about matters of fact, and beliefs about “relations of ideas”, , better, to the distinction made by Russell between “acquaintance” and “description”. Real assent always rests upon a particular experience of a thinking subject, such as a perception, although it can be kept in memory. In other terms, it rests upon the apprehension of an individual thing. It is what Newman properly calls *belief* (IV.3) Notional apprehension, and notional assent, on the contrary, being relations to abstract and general entities, are less vivid, and hence weaker in the mind. Newman distinguishes four kinds of such assents: *professions*, where you assent to something which you do not fully understand, *credences*, or assents gained by hearsay, opinions, or half-thought conjectures, *presumptions*, where we have confidence in some instinctive principles, and *speculations*, the conscious acceptances of propositions explicitly held true. Newman has also another distinction, between *simple* and *complex* assent. The latter he calls *certitude*, the former he calls *material certitude*. They have both a real and a notional element.

They both have to do with our reasons for assenting propositions, or the grounds for them. Certitudes are assents becoming complex and persistent.

To complete this general taxonomy, one needs to mention a last division: the division between *assent* and *inference*. It is, with the distinction between real and notional assent, the most important one in Newman's book. Inference, like assent, is an act of the mind which leads us to accept a proposition; but it is not, according to Newman a kind of assent at all; for it is *conditional* upon the acceptance of other propositions, whereas assent is, according to him, *unconditional*. Inference is matter of degree; in inferring we accept propositions under certain conditions; when we assent, on the contrary, we accept them fully, without considering their reasons. Thus assent is an all or nothing affair; it cannot have degrees.

Let us try to summarize these various distinctions in a table:



As one sees, Newman has a fairly complex taxonomy of credal attitudes, and one of the interests of his book is to propose fine-grained distinctions where

in ordinary as well as in philosophical usage these terminological and conceptual matters are not well-settled. Up to now, I have only enunciated the main distinctions made by Newman. I have not explained them. The question arises: are these species of *belief*? But the answer to this question is not clear at all. As we saw, belief is for Newman a species of assent, real assent. But on the other hand, he sometimes calls varieties of notional assents, such as credences and opinions “beliefs” (e.g. p.167, VI.1). Another problem is that he sometimes says that credences, presumptions, etc. are not assents, but inferences of a proposition (e.g. p.175). And when he comes to the varieties of attitudes to which assents give rise in the religious domain, Newman then again talks of “beliefs”, this time with a sense which is more or less akin to “faith”. So on the one hand, belief seems to be a subvariety of assent, together with other credal attitudes, and on the other it seems to be the genus of which the varieties of assent are the kinds.

We may hope to shed some light on these issues by looking further into his two main distinctions, between real and notional assent on the one hand, and between assent and inference on the other. I start with the second.

2. ASSENT AND INFERENCE/ DOES ASSENT HAVE DEGREES?

Newman’s distinction between assent and inference is best approached through his criticism of Locke’s celebrated doctrine of degrees of assent, which occurs in chapter VI (“Assent considered as conditional”). Here he considers Locke’s views in the section “Of Probability” in the *Essay* (IV, 15). As one knows, Locke here holds that there are, associated with each proposition, degrees of probability which are the measure of our assent, or confidence towards a proposition (what we would call today the “evidence” in favor of a proposition”). On the basis of this principle, Locke formulates his simple rule about the ethics

of belief: *the degree of our assent to a proposition ought to be proportioned to the strength of the evidence for that proposition.*³

Now Newman challenges both of Locke's views - that assent has degrees, and that it should be proportioned to the strength of our evidence. Against these he remarks that we may continue to assent to a proposition, when we have forgotten the evidence for it, and that sometimes we have excellent grounds for a proposition, based on good arguments, although we do not assent to it. "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still". As such, as Price (1967, p.136) notes, such arguments prove nothing against Locke: they only show that we can have unreasonable behaviors in continuing to hold propositions which we stop deeming as true, or can jump to conclusions which we affirm even though we have no evidence for them. Locke might answer that his rule holds only for reasonable assent. But Newman intends to deny that assent is an act of mind which admits of degrees at all. He holds that Locke has confused assent with what he himself calls inference. His ground for holding this is inference is always conditional, whereas assent is "unconditional". In drawing and inference, we accept it conditionally upon certain premises. An inference - be it "formal" as a logical inference, or "natural" when it is inductive is always of the form "Because there are facts A, B, C... P is true (or probable)". When we make an act of inference of this kind, we recognize that there are "reasons" for holding P on the basis of certain facts A, B, C, etc. what Newman seems to mean is that the proposition P which is assented on the basis of these facts, or on the basis of these reasons, is distinct from them. But, as Price (1967, p.139 sq.) notes, we should expect Newman to say that in inferring, we have to assent to propositions, and that it is different from noticing an implication or an entailment. In other terms, there is a fundamental distinction between on the one hand "P, therefore Q", where one has to assert P in order to derive Q, and on the other hand "If P

³ I use here H.H.Price's formulation (Price 1967, p.131); actually Locke's rule is more complex, see Helm 1994, pp 85-90 for a more complex formulation.

then Q”, where “P” is only considered and not affirmed. But if inference proper is of the first form, how can it be “conditional” and how can it not involve any act of assent or assertion? Indeed, p.182 (p.137 of the 1947 edition), he seems to confuse the two when he remarks that we talk of “conditional assent”, although we put a condition upon what we assent, the assent is not conditional. For he says that “to assent to - “If this man is in consumption, his days are numbered”- is as little a conditional as to assent to “Of this consumptive patient the days are numbered”- which (though with the conditional form) is an equivalent proposition.” But the two propositions are not equivalent at all: the former is of the form “If P then Q”, and the second is of the form “P, therefore Q”.

So, on the one hand Newman fails to recognize that inference itself might involve assents, and on the other hand, he fails to recognize that we might assent on the basis of some conditional facts. Whatever he may mean by “conditional”, what he means, when he distinguishes assent from inference is fairly clear. He means to deny that one can assent, in the proper sense, to a proposition upon the basis of conditional facts or probabilities, or that, if one does, assent is a state of mind which is distinct from the kinds of reasons that one has to enter in to it. What he actually wants to say is that assent is indifferent to reasons or justifications, and free from degrees. In this sense, assent is distinct from *doubt*. This view looks strange when applied to logical inferences which are supposed to be certain, but it makes sense when it concerns inductive or “matters of fact” kinds of inferences.

But this view has unwelcome consequences. It seems to attach assent to an act of the will which is independent of the evidence or reasons that one has to accept a proposition as true. This is quite obvious from such passages as the following:

“Life is long enough for a religion of inferences; we shall never have done beginning, if we determine to begin with proof. We shall ever be laying our foundations; we shall turn theology into evidences, and divines into textuaries.

Resolve to believe nothing, and your must prove your proofs and analyze your elements, sinking farther and farther and finding “in the lowest depth a lower deep”, till you come to the broad bossom of scepticism. I would rather be bound to defend the reasonableness of assuming that Christianity is true, than to demonstrate a moral governance from the physical world. Life is for action. If we insist on proofs for everything, we shall never come to action; to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith.” (P.95, IV.3).

Such passages have the flavor of an anticipation of William James’s views in *The Will to believe*; indeed they look like a kind a form of pragmatism or fideism, in the sense of these view that we ought to reject Locke’s ethics of belief, which received its Victorian expression in Clifford’s maxim: “ It is wrong, always and everywhere, to believe anything on the basis of insufficient evidence.” A number of writers have concluded from such considerations that “belief is a matter of the will”.⁴ So is Newman a voluntarist and a fideist about belief, as one might suspect him to be?

In spite of certain descriptions like the above, and of his characterizations of assent as a mental *act* , it is not clear that Newman thinks that assent is only a matter of the will. First, his distinction between assent and apprehension makes it clear that apprehension is a passive, and not an active state of mind. Belief cannot be a matter of the will in the sense that one could decide to believe in the sense of deciding to entertain nay proposition come what may.⁵ Second, he does not mean to deny that there are no links between assenting and having reasons to assent. For instance on p.171 he says:

“I have been showing that inference and assent are distinct acts of the mind, and that they may be made apart from each other. Of course, I cannot be taken

⁴ For instance Van Fraassen 1984.

⁵ See Williams 1973 for the classical arguments on this score.

to mean that there is no legitimate or actual connection between them, as if arguments adverse to a conclusion did not naturally hinder assent; or as if the inclination to give assent were not greater or less according as the particular act of inference expressed a stronger or weaker probability; or as if assent did not always imply grounds in reason, implicit, if not explicit, or could be rightly given without sufficient grounds. So much is commonly felt that assent must give their own will as their very reason for assenting, if they can think of nothing better; “*stat pro ratione voluntas.*”

What he means instead, he tells us, is that assent may not be withheld in the absence of good reasons, and that it is conceivable without them, hence that it cannot be identified to “inference” nor with the existence of certain degrees of holding a proposition. In that respect, Newman’s dissent from Locke might be merely terminological: what Locke calls “assent” is actually the same as what Newman calls “inference”, and what the latter calls “assent” designates another state of mind.

Now *this* is a perfectly reasonable doctrine. And we can reformulate it in contemporary vocabulary. A number of contemporary writers (e.g Lehrer 1979, Stalnaker 1984, Cohen 1992; for a general statement of these differences, and other references see Engel 1998, 1998a) have distinguished at least two kinds of belief, or belief-like attitudes: *belief* properly so-called on the one hand, and *acceptance*.

On such classifications of credal states, beliefs have the following characteristics:

- (a) they are non voluntary, and not normally under voluntary control;
- (b) they “aim at truth”, i.e they have a “world to mind direction of fit”, in the sense of being states which are made true by the way the world is, unlike desires, which have “a mind to world direction of fit”, in the sense of not being made true by the world, but satisfied or not satisfied

- by it;
- (c) beliefs are shaped by evidence, and the degree of reasonableness of a belief is proportional to the degree of evidence that one has in favour of its truth (otherwise it is a case of wishful thinking or a form of self-deceit);
 - (d) an agent's belief are subject to an ideal of integration or of rationality, which implies that we try to make our beliefs to cohere with others;
 - (e) beliefs are context independent, they are not held relative to one context and not relative to another
 - (f) they have degrees, which are subjective probabilities measurable
By typical kinds of behaviours, such as bets

The notion of belief (let us call it belief*) which fits the description (a)-(f) is thus recognizably that which has been proposed by a number of writers from Ramsey (1931) on: belief are dispositional or functional states, which have an essential link to our actions, and which are “maps by which we steer”; they have degrees in the sense given by the Bayesian view of “partial beliefs” (this is what I call the “dispositional-functional” view in Engel 1995, 1997). Now from this description of belief* follow two important features: they are not voluntary, because they mainly serve as outputs from environmental inputs (and thus cannot be manipulated by the subject who has them, so that the outputs might in turn become inputs of a cognitive system), and they are not, at least in principle linked to conscious states of the mind, not to acts of assenting to propositions (they can be merely tacit or implicit: there is no contradiction in the idea of a belief* that one might have without ever had assented to it in a conscious way).

Now in contrast to belief* in this sense, the writers mentioned above intend to sort out another state of mind, which has, at least *prima facie* opposite characteristics, and which they call *acceptances*:

- (a') acceptance is voluntary or intentional; in a sense it the product of

some motivation or decision to believe, at least in the sense that one has to affirm it in some conscious act, and possibly because one may hold it contrary to the evidence;

- (b') acceptance does not aim at truth, but at utility or success; it is a pragmatic notion: one can accept what one believes to be false, for prudential or pragmatic reasons;
- (c') for this very reason, acceptance need not be shaped by evidence;
- (d') acceptance is not regulated by an ideal of integration: an agent might accept that P without feeling the need to integrate P into his former views, nor by feeling committed to make it cohere with them;
- (e') unlike beliefs*, acceptances are context dependent; one can accept something relative to a context, and not relative to another context;
- (f') acceptances, unlike beliefs, do not have degrees: they are categorical and not attached to subjective probabilities; they have an "all or nothing" character.

Most of the writers about acceptance in this sense notice that it is independent from belief* in the sense that there can be beliefs* without acceptances (things that we believe without accepting them) and acceptances without beliefs* (things that we accept, on pragmatic grounds, without believing* them).

Now if one agrees that there are two different states of mind (or possibly two different kinds of states of mind) like these, in many respects the description just given of acceptances fits the descriptions given by Newman of what he calls "assent", and his descriptions of what he calls "inferences" fits better what I have called "belief*". Thus his "grammar of assent" might well be called a grammar of acceptance (although he uses the word "acceptance" in various contexts to characterise generally the holding of propositions). When he notices, for instance, in the chapter quoted above where he criticizes Locke (VI.1) that one can see all the grounds of inferring a proposition, but nevertheless refuse to hold it- to

assent it - or that one can assent to propositions the grounds of which we have forgotten, he seems to notice something about the contextual character of assent, in contrast to the uncontextual nature of inference. He seems also to relate assent to what Descartes called “judgment”, as an act of the will which affirms the contents given by the understanding (and which is, for Descartes, one of the sources of our freedom). Last but not least, he points out the “all or nothing”, or “unconditional” nature of acceptance: what we assent to is not conditioned by particular premises in our reasoning or actions. Indeed in some passages, such as p.175 (VI.1) Newman contrasts clearly assent in his sense from a range of attitudes which imply for him degrees: “suspicion, conjecture, presumption, persuasion, belief, conclusion, moral certainty”. Note that “belief” here is included in the list.

There are, nevertheless, some inconsistencies between Newman’s description of assent and the modern writers’ views about acceptance. First, as I have noted, if assent is “unconditional”, acceptance, for these writers, is hardly “unconditional” at least in this sense: it is conditioned by our desire to respond to particular facts, and by certain objectives. For instance the teacher may accept, although he does not believe* it, that the schoolboy performs well, because he does not want to discourage him by revealing his errors too quickly. Newman seems to tie assent to a form of conviction which is incompatible with such pragmatic condition. Indeed he seems to speak of assent in the sense of an act of holding true a proposition *come what may*, in the very sense in which Wittgenstein, in *On Certainty* talks of “holding fast” some propositions that are beyond doubt.. Newman description of these “assents” looks in fact quite Moorean or Wittgensteinian :

“We all believe, without any doubt, that we exist; that we have an individuality and identity of our own; that we think, feel, and act, in the home of our own minds; that we have a present sense of good and evil, of a right or wrong, or a

true and a false, and of a beautiful and this hideous, however we analyse our ideas of them.[...]

Nor is our assent which we give to facts limited to the range of self-consciousness. We are sure beyond all hazard of a mistake, that our own self is not the only existing being; that there is an external world, that it is a system with parts and a whole, a universe carried out by laws, and that the future is unaffected by the past. We accept and hold with an unqualified asset, that the earth, considered as a phenomenon, is a globe. [...]"

Here the contrast is not between assent as a conscious act of acceptance of a proposition and dispositional belief, but, as in Moore and Wittgenstein, between certitude and doubt. An inference is not an assent, for Newman, because it is, even when it is formal (p.180), conditional upon premises. The trouble is that Newman, in the quotation above, uses the term "belief" to characterise such assents, and his mention of assents which are "not limited to the range of self-consciousness" could well fall within the category of beliefs*. When Newman talks of such states of mind as presumptions, things that we take for granted for a particular purpose, such as hypotheses, he talks of "half assents (p.181-183). So he would probably not count acceptances in the contemporary sense as "assents". Assent is an even stronger state of mind. Indeed we might call it belief without doubt, or groundless belief. The trouble is that such beliefs do not normally give way to any assent at all, if one means by that the internal act of holding a proposition as true. If I believe that the earth is round, I can believe it without ever assenting to it, as Moore and Wittgenstein famously note when they remark the oddity of such awovals as "I believe (or for that matter assent) that the earth is round".

There is, however, one point one which there seems to be a strong convergence between Newman's "assent" and the modern writers notion of "acceptance" as I have described it above: it rests upon the claim that assent does

not admit of degrees. Most contemporary writers are anxious to distinguish acceptance from belief in the sense of “partial belief”. Acceptances, they say, are categorical, and one accepts a proposition or not; one does not believe it to a degree n . It does not mean that one does not most often accept that P for a reason, or on the basis of certain degrees of belief, for in general one is led to assent to a proposition because one believes it (see e.g. Cohen 1992, p.17). But as Cohen notes, this does not happen all the time, since there are cases of acceptance without belief.. In general the relevant distinction is between a) believing categorically (or accepting) that P is true at degree n and b) believing to degree n that P is true. The former, but not the latter, is an acceptance. It turns out that Newman makes the very same distinction when he says:

“Assents to the plausibility, probability, doubtfulness or untrustworthiness, of a proposition [are not] variations of assent to an inference, but assents to a variation in inferences. When I assent to a doubtfulness, or to a probability, my assent, as such, is as complete as if I assented to a truth; it is not a certain degree of assent.” (P.175)

In the same vein, Cohen says that “acceptance does not admit of ...internal variation than in its content” and that although acceptance worthiness is a matter of degree, it is not a subjective state of mind like degree of belief (ibid.p.114).

It turns out, then, that Newman’s distinction between assent and inference is both similar and dissimilar to the modern writers’ distinction between belief and acceptance. On the one hand, Newman correctly distinguishes an attitude which is susceptible of degrees and one which is not. On the other hand, he fails to see that cases of what he calls “inferences” involve the taking of certain propositions as true categorically, i.e without degree: pragmatic acceptances would be for him cases of conditional inferences, therefore not “assent” in Newman’s purported sense of this word. Moreover what he calls “assents” fall more squarely into the category of “holdings fast”, things that one takes for granted come what may. But

these could as well be called beliefs, for they do not give rise to acts of assenting at all.

So is Newman's classification incoherent, or is a mere matter of terminology? It looks incoherent only if we insist in assimilating it to Cohen and others' strong distinction between belief as a passive and dispositional state of mind and acceptances as voluntary and categorical states. But it is not if we take assent to be as a species of belief that we hold *strongly*, and which, for this reason, is immune to doubt. What Newman calls assent involves the holding as true of a given proposition, but this proposition need not be "in front of the mind" of a subject at all. It need not be a judgment in Descartes' sense, something which is affirmed by the will. Indeed it can be passive, and not active, and in that respect it is also quite unlike acceptance.

Newman reveals more clearly what he has in mind when he talks about our assent to "our Lord's divinity" and adds:

"This doctrine of the intrinsic integrity and indivisibility (if I may so speak) of assent [does not] interfere with the teaching of Catholic theology as to the prominence or strength in divine faith, which as a supernatural origin, when compared with all belief which is merely natural and human."(p.186)

What he means, he adds, is that this kind of faith differs from human faith not "merely in degree of assent, but in its being superior in nature and kind."

The trouble here is that he keeps talking in terms of degrees, although such degrees are beyond, so to say, any assignment of degree. And he keeps talking of it in terms of belief. So after all, for him, assent is a species of belief.

If this is so, we have reasons to doubt that there is such a sharp distinction as that between assent and inference. As we saw above Newman himself recognizes that assent is always based upon inferences (see the "*stat pro ratione voluntas*" passage p.171 quoted above). P.167 he also says that the recognition of the reasons for assent is "an inferential act". And at the beginning of his chapter on formal inference (ch.VIII) he says that "inference is the conditional

acceptance of a proposition".As we saw above, unless there is confusion between a conditional "If P then Q" and an inference "P therefore Q", inference can hardly be without acceptance or, in Newman's terminology, assent.

Now the same thing can be said about the belief/acceptance distinction proposed by the contemporary writers. Like beliefs, most acceptances are based on evidence. Like beliefs they have rational connexions with our other beliefs, and consequences for the functional characterisations of an individual.

(see Engel 1998 for other arguments to this effect).

It turns out, then, that the various attitudes which Newman distinguishes under the name of assent stand much more on a continuum than there are sharp distinctions between them.

3) "REAL" AND "NOTIONAL" ASSENT, or :CAN WE BELIEVE WHAT WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND?

Let us turn now to Newman's other main distinction, between "real" and "notional" assent. He introduces it in his first chapter, through the distinction between two kinds of "apprehension" or "interpretation" of propositions. He introduces the distinction thus (p.10). A schoolboy may apprehend the poet's words "*Dum Capitolium scandet cum tacita virgine Pontifex*"; he understands the proposition, the concepts which are expressed in it, but he has only an abstract hold of the proposition, "yet without the words therefore bringing before him at all the living image which they would light in the mind of a contemporary of the poet, who had seen the fact described, or a modern historian who had duly informed himself in the religious phenomena, and by meditation had realized the Roman ceremonial , of the Age of Augustus." The schoolboy has a "notional" apprehension, the contemporary or the historian a "real" one. Newman also points out that the same proposition can have at different times of a life of an individual a notional and real apprehension.such examples occur, he notes, most

often in religious setting. For instance a child educated in a pious family may assent notionally to the proposition “God loves us all”, but his assent can, when he becomes adult, become real. Newman uses this contrast to distinguish religious assents, which we have when we pray God or thank Him, from theological assents, which rest upon a notional attitude. (p.99 beginning of ch.V). As I said above, the distinction is between an abstract and conceptual understanding and a “vivid” one. It reminds us of Russell’s distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, or the contemporary distinction between a belief *de re* and a belief *de dicto*. But Newman does not imply that a real apprehension, and the kind of assent which goes with it, real assent, involves necessarily a contact with the *res* about which it is; it may involve, as he says “images”. Real assents are assents which we understand fully, while notional assents are assents that we understand only partly. It does not matter here that Newman seems to rely upon a sort of pre-Fregean or pre-Wittgensteinian view of meaning and understanding as based on grasping images before one’s mind. The interesting fact is that he allows for a kind of attitude to propositions which does not involve full understanding.

Here too Newman makes several useful distinctions between varieties of assent. At the lower level, so to say, are acts of assents to propositions of which neither the subject nor the predicate are understood, such as “*Lucern is medico sativa*”. A child, says Newman can assent to the truth of this sentence without understanding it. He can also assent to its truth, but on the basis of some authority, like his mother’s. But assent here goes without apprehension or understanding. This attitude is what Davidson, for instance, calls “holding-true” a certain sentence. In modern terminology, one can hold true a certain sentence, for instance “*All the mimsies are borogroves*”, without understanding a single word of it, i.e without understanding the proposition it expresses, i.e without understanding *that* all the mimsies are borogroves. Next are the kinds of notional assents where the subject understands something of the proposition expressed,

but does not understand it fully, or understands it on the basis of an inference. Cases of the first kind are close to the previous one: an authority- the church, a master, etc.- gives “his word for it”. These are called by Newman “professions”. Other cases are cases of what Newman calls “credences”, “spontaneous acceptance of the various informations which are by whatever means conveyed to our minds”. We could call them common sense beliefs as well. What Newman calls “opinions” are rather classed in the second kind: they are assents not to the truth of a proposition, but to its probability; hence they seem to depend upon an inference. The last two categories that he distinguishes are those of “presumption”, which is assent on the basis of principles, and “speculations”, which have the same properties, but bear on the most abstract notions. The other sorts of credal states are, according to Newman, “real assents”. Real assents, as we saw, are fully understood. What does Newman mean by that? His criterion is often the vividness of an image. But in many other descriptions, it is much more:

“While assent, or Belief, presupposes some apprehension of the things believes, inference requires no apprehension of things inferred, that in consequence inference is concerned with surfaces and aspects; that it begins with itself and ends with itself; that it does not reach as far as facts; that it is employed upon formulas; that, as far as it takes real objects of whatever kind into account, such as motives or actions, character and conduct, art, science, taste, morals religion, it deals with them, not as they are, but simply in its own line, as materials of argument or inquiry, that they are nothing more than major and minor premises and conclusions. Belief, on the other hand, being concerned with things concrete, not abstract, which variously excite the mind from their moral or imaginative properties, has for its objects, not only directly what is true, but inclusively what is beautiful, admirable, heroic; objects which kindle devotion, rouse the passions, and attach the affections; and thus it leads the way to actions

of every kind, to the establishment of principles, and the formation of character, and thus is intimately connected with what is individual and personal.” (IV, 3, p.90)

It is hard to see what to make of such passages. Here Newman seems to contrast belief proper with inference under a criterion which has nothing to do with the kind of attitude that they are, but with the kind of *contents* with which they deal. Real belief, so to say, is not notional or abstract, it does not deal with reasoning and concepts, it does not deal with facts, but with matters “concrete”, “personal” and “individual”. This theme, that assent is not indifferent to the kinds of contents with which it deals, contrasts strongly with one of the basic assumptions of contemporary philosophy about belief: belief is an attitude which is distinguished only in psychological terms, through the kind of mental state that it is, and not through the kind of content it involves. This assumption goes back to Hume. It can be formulated thus: the fact that something is a belief has nothing to do with the kind of content with which it deals nor with the kind of justification that it has; its subject matter is indifferent.⁶ In other terms one characterizes something as a belief in abstraction from the kind of content it has. Newman rejects this Humean principle. Something is a belief if it deals with, so to say, matters of personal or even vital interest. It is very difficult for us, today’s readers, to understand this view, for we tend to subscribe to the Humean principle. What we take as beliefs are states of the individual, which figure in the network of his inferences and his actions. For Newman these are not beliefs, because they do not lead us, so to say, to live our ideas.

Again this may be only a matter of terminology. But should we accept Newman’s principle that nothing is “really” a belief unless we *understand* it in

⁶ The point is well formulated by D. Schulthess, “Psychologie et epistemologie de la croyance selon Hume”, *Dialectica*, 47, 2-3, 1993, p.258.

some vivid or lively way? Is there any reason to deny that one can believe what one does not understand?

It is quite interesting to remark that this issue has surfaced in the recent literature. In several papers, and in particular in his (1997) the anthropologist Dan Sperber argues that there are at least two kinds of states of the belief-kind: beliefs proper, which he calls “intuitive”, characterized by the fact that they are stored in a “data base” and can be used as premises for inferences, and what he calls “reflective beliefs”, which are not representations, but attitudes towards representation. Intuitive beliefs are “first-order” representations; reflective beliefs are metarepresentations. In the latter category, Sperber classifies precisely those beliefs which are acquired on the basis of some authority, and held true without a proper understanding of them. In the former, he classifies our perceptions and spontaneous inferences. Sperber calls the latter “beliefs”, but they lack something which only beliefs proper have: they are not genuinely understood, and are semantically indeterminate. So we can call them, following Recanati (1993) “quasi beliefs”. When someone believes, for instance, on the basis of an authority, say Lacan (in Sperber’s example), that “the unconscious is structured like a language”, he does not genuinely understand what the master said; he only has a metarepresentation about a given representation. But according to Recanati, it is not true that the sentence “The unconscious is structured like a language” is simply metarepresented and uninterpreted by the subject. Using Kaplan’s distinction between the character of a symbol and its content, Recanati argues that in quasi beliefs like “The master said “The unconscious is structured like a language”, there is a hidden operator, which he calls the “deferential operator” which takes us from a context where an agent tacitly refers to a certain cognitive agent (an individual or a community) to a certain content, the content it has for the agent. In other terms, if I understand Recanati correctly, what the subject grasps is that *somebody else* understands the symbol in question. Now is this genuine understanding, is it “real assent” in Newman’s sense? No, for the speaker

does not have the means to endow the symbol with meaning, or “life”. But such representations can have the ordinary status that Sperber gives to beliefs proper: they can be stored in the data base, they can lead to actions, to inferences, etc.

Just as we saw no reason to draw a sharp dividing line between belief and acceptances, between assents and inferences, there is no sharp dividing line between belief and quasi belief. There is a difference of degree, not of kind, between the various attitudes. In a sense, Newman recognizes this, for he himself calls all such attitudes “assents” and sometimes “beliefs”. But then it involves recognizing that the mind is much more seamless in his attitudes than he allows, and that there are much more connexions between its operations at the “lower” level of belief and at the “higher level” of real assents. If this is correct too, there must not be so much difference between ordinary belief, about matters of facts, and religious beliefs.

