The Winter of My Desolation,' Conscience and the Contradictions of Atheism according to John Henry Newman,

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Among the historic advances bringing into realization both the promise and the menace of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche and John Henry Newman identified a momentous reversal in religious convictions.¹ Something absolutely fundamental was dying. Both discerned an irretrievable decline in the religious confidence and doctrinal commitments that had for fifteen hundred years specified the character of Christian Europe and whose dissolution constituted now for the individual believer and for the religious culture of the West a defiant, even insurmountable crisis. Both recognized that this disintegration bespoke not another episodic appearance of chronic religious alienation nor the momentary revivification of an ancient disbelief. A profound cultural reversal, unique in Christian history, was claiming the nations of Europe. It was a revolution, gathering continual increase in its distinguished adherents as an educated skepticism about creed and denominational allegiances almost imperceptibly matured into an open and outspoken dismissal of any reality of God.² Nietzsche and Newman

¹ “From the time that I began to occupy my mind with theological subjects I have been troubled at the prospect, which I considered to lie before us, of an intellectual movement against religion, so special as to have a claim upon the attention of all educated Christians.” John Henry Newman, “On Final Causes,” as in The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty, ed. J. Derek Holmes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 156.
foresaw that this denial was to break upon the subsequent century and eventually tell upon all the portions of what had once been Christendom.

For Nietzsche, this was the greatest event in human history, the death of God — the coming to acceptance that "the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable."

For Newman, this dark foreshadowing of an even darker future formed "the winter of my desolation," as the world moved with increasing momentum toward the repudiation of what he held most tenaciously within it: "And in these latter days, in like manner, outside the Catholic Church things are tending, — with far greater rapidity than in that old time from the circumstance of the age, — to atheism in one shape or another. What a scene, what a prospect, does the whole of Europe present at this day! and not only Europe, but every government and every civilization through the world, which is under the influence of the European mind!" It was, he judged, an unprecedented disruption: "that the writers and thinkers of the day do not even believe there is a God... Christianity has never yet had experience of a world simply irreligious.


It was difficult even to speak with great precision about what was taking place. Univocal terms with which to name this cresting disbelief were hard to come by. "Atheism" had for centuries denoted immorality, in a manner that one today might speak of a person as "godless." So in 1846, George Jacob Holyoake, the last man tried and imprisoned in England for the blasphemy that was atheism, coined the term "secularist" indicating an allegiance to a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable.6 In 1869, some twenty-five years later, Thomas Huxley invented and subsequently presented to the Metaphysical Society "agnostic" to distinguish his scepticism from dogmatic denial or affirmation.7 Newman's studies

6 George Jacob Holyoake, English Secularism, A Confession of Belief (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1896) 35. The description continued: "Its essential principles are three:
1. The improvement of this life by material means.
2. That science is the available Providence of man.
3. That it is good to do good. Whether there be other good or not, the good of the present life is good, and it is good to seek that good."

"When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; a Christian or a freethinker; I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer;... The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure they had attained a certain 'gnosis', — had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure that I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble..."
of the early Church had recorded how ambiguously had run his own chosen term, "atheism." Neither the meaning of the term nor its applications were precisely fixed, and the range of its indeterminacy contributed to the confusion of the religious controversies and passions in which it was enlisted.

For the ancient pagans, as Newman noted, "atheists" were those who denied polytheism; for the Christians, those who affirmed it. So Julian the Apostate charged that Christians preferred "atheism to godliness." Indeed, "atheism" was "a popular imputation upon Christians as it had been before on philosophers and poets, some of whom better deserved it."8 As if in rebuttal, Christians charged that atheism belongs with the Gentiles who did not know the true God. Atheism — "godlessness" — came to denote, confusedly in the polemic exchanges, either those disowning or denying God, or those disowned by God, or those denying the gods of popular

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religion their appropriate worship, or those denying Jesus Christ as God.

But by the fourth century, Athanasius could apply the term not simply to pagans, but to a fellow, albeit heretical, Christian, claiming of Arius that "he is on all sides recognized as godless (atheist,) Arius," as the same distinguished Alexandrian Father of the Church had similarly characterized Asterius and Valentinus. Eustathius had marked the Arians in general as "anthropous atheious," and Arius himself complained that the Patriarch Alexander had driven him and his followers from Alexandria as if they were atheists.\(^9\) The word ranged in and out of inter-Christian controversies. Newman registered all of this ambiguity, recalling in a letter to John Allen that in the previous century even the great Joseph Butler had been accused of "making atheists" by his mode of argumentation, while Newman associated David Hume with Epicurus as a "teacher of atheism."\(^10\) For Newman himself, however, "atheism" seems to mean any of the forms in which one effectively asserts that "there is no God," and he saw very little difference between such an assertion and the proposition that "nothing definite can be known about Him."\(^11\)

**Part One: The Problem**

Newman experienced the problem set by this growing atheism not as a personal temptation, but as a searching contradiction. For the existence of God, he stated repeatedly, was as certain to him as was his own existence.\(^12\) "If I am asked why I believe in a God, I answer that it is because I believe in myself, for I feel it impossible

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\(^11\) *Idea*, 49.
to believe in my own existence (and of that fact I am quite sure) without believing also in the existence of Him, who lives as a Personal, All-seeing, All-judging Being in my conscience.” Yet there was an epistemological paradox admittedly present within this conviction: “Of all points of faith, the being of a God, is to my own apprehension, encompassed with most difficulty, and yet borne in upon our minds with the most power.” “Most difficulty… Most power.” This incongruity proved the experiential soil for the profound religious antinomies in the world of the nineteenth century.

For in the culture around him, what Newman called “the world of men,” he experienced the starkest contravention of his primordial conviction: “The world seems simply to give the lie to that great truth, of which my whole being is so full.” This opposition did not induce the suspension or the destruction of belief, but it did evoke a profound confusion — the kind of dislodging confusion, as he noted, that one would feel before a world become incoherent, as if the external world had denied Newman’s own existence or as if one had glanced into a mirror and seen no reflection of his face. A mirror? Because the world, which should reflect its Creator, instead denied the existence of God, as Newman found, in its “pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary hopeless irreligion, that condition of the whole race, so fearfully yet exactly described in the Apostle’s words, ‘having no hope and without God in the world’.”

This contradiction constituted the “profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution.” Atheism for Newman was not

12 *Apo.*, 216.
13 *Apo.*, 180 (italics added).
14 *Apo.*, 215.
15 *Apo.*, 216.
a warring of diverse arguments or even divergent positions within a religious controversy, conflicts into which he readily entered and in which he felt at home. It exceeded anything that could be called either schism or heresy. It embodied the most absolute contrariety between foundational religious claims: between the waning of belief and the voice of conscience in which Newman found the reality of God as given inescapably. It was a world not so much in disagreement as deeply inconsequent.

To understand something of the telling strength of this antinomy, one must recall that Newman insisted upon the indefectibility of human certitude. Assent is a judgment that such-and-such is the case. Certitude is reflex or complex assent, the “consciousness of knowing, as expressed in the phrase, ‘I know that I know’.” Certitude is thus “an assent to an assent, what is commonly called a conviction.” Now Newman contended, that judicious women and men are in their convictions only infrequently in error: “Among fairly prudent and circumspect men, there are far fewer instances of false certitude than at first sight might be supposed. Men are often doubtful about propositions which are really true; they are not commonly certain of such as are simply false. What they judge to be a certainty is in matter of fact for the most part a truth.”

This assertion was fundamental to the entire enterprise of A Grammar of Assent, that the way that human beings de facto do reason is the way they should reason, that there is a connaturality between the mind and reality such that in general either human convictions about truth are correct or else one will not be able to rest in them. It was of critical importance to register “what Certitude is, not simply as it must be, but in our actual experience of it.”

17 Apo., 217.
19 G.A., 133.
And this experience indicates three conditions that assent become certitude: [1] that it follows on investigation and proof, [2] that it is accompanied by a specific sense of intellectual satisfaction, [3] 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." 20 But certitude is the assent to an assent, and one of its characteristics is its stability.

The difference between simple assent and conviction told in the character of religious belief: certitude was indefectible not only in its truth but in its lasting, unshakeable character. While "assents may and do change; certitudes endure. This is why religion demands more than an assent to its truth; it requires a certitude, or at least an assent which is convertible into certitude on demand. Without certitude in religious faith there may be much decency of profession and of observance, but there can be no habit of prayer, no directness of devotion, no intercourse with the unseen, no generosity of self-sacrifice. Certitude then is essential to the Christian." 21 At a minimum authentic religious belief was the stuff of certitude.

It is true that great numbers of human beings pass through life without either serious doubt or certitude, even "on the most important proposition that can occupy their minds." Their judgments are only those of simple assent, the beliefs and opinions by which human beings live, which usually forms the fabric of the ordinary, the day-by-day beliefs and sometimes the texture of their allegiances — human beings who "having very little intellectual training, have never had the temptation to doubt, and never the opportunity to be certain." The faith of the medievals was such, but it possessed what was essential for religious assent, i.e., a material or

20 G.A., 168.
21 G.A., 144.
interpretative certitude. Their religious belief had only to be questioned in order to develop into that explicit reflex assent that could be called certitude. One might term all authentic religious belief a latent certitude.\textsuperscript{22}

How, then, could religious faith fail in Europe — fail not in this or that instance, nor simply with the superficial and thoughtless, but fail with serious and reflective thinkers such as George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, and Newman’s great friend William Froude, fail from group to group, even from national culture to national culture, and that religious belief fail which was as evident to Newman as his own existence? Does one deny that religious belief with its interpretative certitude had been present in the centuries past? Certainly Newman did not. Yet all over Europe, one saw religious belief decline through the centuries that formed modernity and in so many instances finally fail. This failure constituted for Newman the scandal of the nineteenth century. How was it possible that propositions accepted for thousands of years, acts of assent to religious truth which were at least material certitudes, convictions for which men and women went to their deaths through the centuries, religious knowledge as well as religious belief that were so much of the texture of the culture — how could all of this fail, and fail so pervasively and with such rapidity as these shadows lengthened over Europe? How was it possible that the intellect, as a matter of fact, could not keep the religious truth it had for centuries preserved? The question, again, is not just Newman’s. Nietzsche’s madman asked the same question: “How did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?”\textsuperscript{23} This for Newman constitutes the contradiction that demanded resolution.

\textsuperscript{22} G.A., 138-139.

\textsuperscript{23} Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science} 3: #125, p. 181.
Part Two: The Ambiguity of Intellect

Newman located the rising destruction of religious belief proximately in the corruption of reason, but this diagnosis mirrored in its complexity the very oppositions it was invoked to explain.

No one celebrated the human intellect more wisely and more lyrically than Newman. "Right reason" could come to the knowledge that God exists, that the soul is immortal, that future retribution awaits the evil. Indeed, these are the basic beliefs of "natural religion," and reason even unaided by grace but exercised with integrity could discover them. Knowledge could be its own end and the university has for its purpose neither art nor utility nor even duty, but intellectual culture: "Here it may leave its scholars, and it has done its work when it has done as much as this. It educates the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it." But in the brilliant promise of intellect lay its liabilities for cancerous self-destruction.

Newman discovered very early in his life that the intellect could corrupt as well as enhance the human spirit. Under the influence of the Oriel Noetics, especially Richard Whately, Newman found himself in 1827 gradually "beginning to prefer intellectual excellence to moral," a realization to which he was awakened by a partial breakdown and the death of his youngest sister, Mary. Right reason could indeed lead one to natural religion. But such reason seems an abstraction before "Reason, considered as a real agent in the world, and as an operative principle in man's nature, with an historical course and with definite results." It takes a very different — a disordered — course; it "considers itself from first

25 Idea, 114.
to last independent and supreme; it requires no external authority; it makes a religion for itself.”28 Such was the critically realistic or — if you will — the pessimistic assessment of Newman, a judgment that remained throughout his life. The arrogance of reason obtains when the human intellect charts the divine insistently within the coordinates of its own capacities and experiences, i.e., when it considers itself so naturally and adequately equipped for the knowledge about God that it refuses to admit any disclosures of the divine that transcend these human parameters. This was “rationalism” for Newman, “a certain abuse of Reason; that is, a use of it for purposes for which it never was intended, and is unfitted. To rationalize in matters of Revelation is to make our reason the standard and measure of the doctrines revealed.”29

Religious rationalism collapsed the distinction between capacities for the human and capacities for the divine. Feuerbach and Freud were advancing a strikingly similar reduction of content of the divine to the human, that the divine was nothing more than the human either writ large or writ paternal and extending this analysis to claim that this was the underlying object in all religious belief, a projection of the human onto an imaginary subject. Newman did not deny that such an event took place, especially in the overextensions of reason. Indeed he saw it as the project of rationalism and the cancerous destruction of all authentic faith.

Accept this, that the mode of the human is to determine the understanding of God, and you have the arrogance, the disorder of intellect. Even if this disordered intellect accepts a religious faith, it does so on its own terms. God is reduced to fit the human

capacities to understand. God is like a human being — only bigger. Here also, the human reason is still liable to the blindness of self-interest, to the deception and energies of the passions, to historical conditioning and unattended motivations — and liable to them in proportion as it considered its own excellence as proof against them.

In considering reason within the concrete history of “fallen man” as well as of salvation, Newman wrote: “I am considering the faculty of reason actually and historically; and in this point of view, I do not think I am wrong in saying that its tendency is towards a simple unbelief in matters of religion. No truth, however sacred, can stand against it, in the long run.” He spoke repeatedly of “the all-corroding, all-dissolving scepticism of the intellect in religious inquiries.” Rationalism or liberalism — “the antidogmatic principle” — was very simply not the appropriate use of reason, but its abuse, its abstraction from the broader contexts of religious life and authority and its employment beyond its orientation and capacity, for the reduction of revealed Mystery to a manageable and obvious set of affirmations. The human mind is made the measure of the reality of God, nothing can be told it which it cannot comprehend and ground for itself, and that which remains obscure and unmastered is discarded. “And this, it is to be feared, is the spirit in which multitudes of us act at the present day.”

The effect is inevitable: the pretensions of a finite intellect to an adequacy and an autonomy that is preposterously unwarranted gradually devolve from its initial and rationalistic claims into the ineluctable fate of the rationalist, a bitter and pervasive scepticism. The sceptic is often little more than the deeply disappointed rationalist.

Reason moves most damagingly in this latter direction when it corrodes the human conscience. It is here that Newman finds the

30 *Apo.*, 218.
possibilities of atheism. For the natural informants or evidence for the existence of God available to all human beings are three: the human conscience, the voice and testimony of humankind, and the system and course of the world.\textsuperscript{32} And the greatest of these was conscience.\textsuperscript{33} Indeed, were it not for conscience, an assessment of the other two informants, i.e., of the course of the world and the directions of human beings, would have left Newman an atheist or a pantheist or a polytheist.\textsuperscript{34} The fundamental natural witness to the reality of God was conscience. It is here above all that one looks for the substantiation of the conviction that God exists.\textsuperscript{35} If conscience is corrupted or misunderstood or deadened or neglected, there is nothing that can take its place.

For Newman, the fundamental religious battle is joined in the nineteenth century between conscience and what he called “the ordinary sin of the intellect.” For the corruption of conscience is a constant threat in a civilized age, “its besetting sin.” Not that one denies conscience, but rather that one transposes or translates it into another, a weaker idiom: “conscience tends to become what is called a moral sense; the command of duty is a sort of taste; sin is not an offence against God, but against human nature.”\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{32} For a remarkable parallel to this triad, cf. Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, 3: #357, pp. 304-310.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{G.A.}, 251: “By Religion I mean the knowledge of God, of His Will, and of our duties towards Him; and there are three main channels which Nature furnishes for our acquiring this knowledge, viz. our own minds, the voice of mankind, and the course of the world, that is, of human life and human affairs... And the most authoritative of these three means of knowledge, as being specially our own, is our own mind whose informations give us the rule by which we test, interpret, and correct what is presented to us for belief, whether by the universal testimony of mankind, or by the history of society and of the world.”

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Apo.}, 216.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{G.A.}, 72-83.

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Idea}, 165.
So Newman could write to Henry Parry Liddon this short note in which he named both the kind of adversary and the kind of devolution consequent upon the weakening and destruction of conscience: "What you say about Arnold’s new book is most painful. But if the generation will give up as superstitious the moral and religious instincts of the mind, not the most logical arguments in behalf of their truth will serve to re-establish them. I have often thought how soon I might get over the sense that murder, as such, is a sin (I am not speaking of the natural horror one has of cruelty — or of murder as in particular cases an injustice) but of murder as such — after I have killed half a dozen persons. I suppose some nurses (not farming nurses) have not any great horror at the idea of killing children. And thus the idea of God may go." 37 To understand the emergence of atheism, then, one must understand the religious character of the human conscience and its corruption. For Newman contended that just as the witness the senses make possible the apprehension of the visible world, so the judgment of conscience serves for the existence of God.

Part Three: Conscience

One recognizes conscience intuitively, that is, through the same internal self-appropriation by which the mind comes to awareness of memory, sensation, and reasoning, i.e., as an act of the mind. A distinction of terms is essential here. One has “faith” in what is external, what is other; but one “intuits” what is internal and part of one’s consciousness: “I would draw a broad line between what is within us and without us, and apply the word ‘faith’ to our reliance <certainty> of things without and not within us... Surely there

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CONSCIENCE AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF ATHEISM

are things prior to faith. I apply the word ‘intuition’ to such… Taking the acts of the mind to bits, therefore, knowledge of my existence is the fourth act; though I call all four one complex act of intuition. Here we have real intuition, but I have faith, not intuition, of the external world.”

One intuits conscience, and one believes in the external fact that conscience delivers — as an object not of intuition but of faith — that is, the existence of God. This external fact is more intimately connected with what is intuited than anything else.”

The existence of God is an object of faith in one of Newman’s peculiar meanings of this word, i.e., the conviction which arises from what is internal [conscience] about an external fact [God] and which is “different in evidence <proof> from every other external fact.”

Newman is quite consciously transposing the grounds for demonstrating the existence of God from the external world to the inner, conscious world of the thinking subject. In this, he is following the current of fundamental thinking set in motion by John Locke and reaching its crest in the nineteenth century with Kant and Hegel — though Newman was neither a Kantian nor a Hegelian. But he agrees with that whole intellectual world in what Richard McKeon would call its “selection,” the fundamental area that must be explored and out of which one would derive the crucial categories and predicates of thought. With Newman’s “epistemological selection,” one investigates the processes of thought to establish warrants for the assertion about things. Intuition is prior to faith.

Like “experience” for William James, “conscience” for Newman is a double-barreled word. It denotes both the recognition of


39 P.N., 2:43.

40 P.N., 2:41; see also p. 39.
the moral content of a situation — in the ethical judgment both of what is right and good and what is wrong and evil — or the consequent and experienced imperative, the demand that one should do the right or good and avoid the wrong or evil. "The feeling of conscience" is thus twofold — but the two are indivisibly one. Conscience is, then, "a moral sense and a sense of duty." The first is a judgment of reason and functions as the principle or source of morals or ethics; the second is a "magisterial dictate" and functions as the principle of religion.41 The first is the rule of right conduct; the second is the summons to and the sanction of right conduct. Newman believed that this second contained the primary and most authoritative aspect of conscience as well as bore the ordinary sense of the word. For "half the world would be puzzled to know what was meant by the moral sense [the first use of the term]; but every one knows what is meant by a good or bad conscience."42

Conscience as dictate was experienced metaphorically as "a voice, or the echo of a voice, imperative and constraining, like no other dictate in the whole of our experience."43 The experience of this dictate comprises two moments: antecedent to choice, in its sense of obligation that such and such is to be done or avoided; subsequent to choice, in the "sanction to that testimony [of conscience] conveyed in the feelings which attend on right or wrong conduct."44 Newman's argument "from conscience" for the existence of God comprises both of these moments in the recognition of obligation, i.e., of what is to be done or should have been done, and also the emotions or feelings that it elicits. He argues that in the unsurpassable and absolute character of the command, one experiences

41 G.A., 73, 76; P.N., 2:47.
42 G.A., 74.
43 G.A., 74-75.
44 G.A., 74.
the sovereign moral government of our lives *quo majus nihil*; in the emotions that attend the command — whether fulfilled or dismissed — one experiences that this government is personal, i.e., it is the government by a person. Let us consider each of these.

The phenomena or intimations of conscience are the experiences of moral obligation or responsibility: “You should do this; you should omit that.” Human perception identifies these intimations of conscience as the reverberations of an admonition in some way other than the subject, i.e., in these dictates, conscience is registering the commanding — even sovereign — direction given by another. One is not simply identifiable with his or her conscience. Neither did one create or excite this sense of obligation — any more than one created or excited the experience of an external world. One found it — or, if you prefer, one was found by it. Conscience recognizes something or someone that is other. “What I am insisting on here,” wrote Newman, “is this: that it [conscience] *commands*; that it praises, <it> blames, it threatens, it implies a future, & it witnesses of the unseen. *It is more than a man’s own self.* The man himself has not power over it, or only with extreme difficulty; he did not make it, he cannot destroy it. He may silence it in particular cases or directions; he may distort its enunciations; but he cannot, or it is quite the exception if he can, he cannot emancipate himself from it. He can disobey it; he [-can] <may> refuse to use it; but it remains. This is Conscience.”45 It is irreducibly other.

Conscience is also irreducibly morally and religiously supreme. One recognizes — note: recognizes without demonstration or proof — that the claim of conscience is superior to every other claim in one’s life. It must be followed no matter what the opposition. It is in this sense absolute — as opposed to hypothetically or conditionally

45 *P.N.*, 2:53.
necessary. It is not another precept in the universe or in consciousness, but supreme over all. Human beings recognize in conscience a moral imperative that should rule over all of their other choices and actions. Thus, conscience in its dictates is the supreme governor.

It is also pervasive. It is present in every option a human being confronts and in every choice a human being makes: to permit, to forbid, to command, to urge. And if conscience is both sovereign and pervasive, then the source of conscience must be in this way sovereign and pervasive. But is its source personal; is it of a person?

In his University Sermon of 1830, Newman seems to have contended that a natural religion founded on conscience could reveal "no points of his [God's] personal character." But he came to perceive that it is the instinct of the human mind to recognize in the data or commands of conscience "an external Master" as it is the instinct of the mind, indeed, "of brute nature" to recognize in the data of sense perception an external world. And this instinctive perception of the personal in the imperatives of conscience seemed to him to be expressed most clearly in the emotions that surrounded the dictates of conscience.

Before a choice is made, one feels the sense of responsibility or obligation for the choice that is to be made; after choice, one feels the sense of satisfaction or shame. "Responsibility" — to whom? "Shame" — before whom? An experience of responsibility or fear or shame implies "that there is One to whom we are responsible,

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47 G.A., 76; see also pp. 71-72.
before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear."  

One does not feel shame before a stone or a horse or a dog; one feels no remorse even about breaking a merely human precept. When one has violated the claims of conscience in a serious matter, however, there is nothing visible necessarily to which we feel this sense of unalloyed responsibility or before which we feel shame and fear, no one or no thing visible whose claims we, through these emotions, recognize as definitive.

Conscience in this manner is like no other experience that human beings undergo, and its reference to the personal other is embodied concretely in this manifold range of spontaneous human emotions: "reverence and awe, hope and fear, especially fear, a feeling which is foreign for the most part, not only to Taste, but even to the Moral Sense, except in consequence of accidental associations." In these emotions, one recognizes that the Other, the source of the imperative, has already been accepted as personal. One may be mortified if his actions have been ugly, but he feels responsible and guilty if his actions have been immoral.

These various perturbations of mind which are characteristic of a bad conscience, and may be very considerable, — self-reproach, poignant shame, haunting remorse, chill dismay at the prospect of the future, — and their contraries, when the conscience is good, as real though less forcible, self-approval, inward peace, lightness of heart, and the like, — these emotions constitute a specific difference between conscience and our other intellectual senses, — common sense, good sense, sense of expedience, taste, sense of honor, and the like, — as indeed they would also constitute between conscience and the moral sense, supposing these two were not aspects of one and the same feeling, exercised upon one and the same subject-matter.

48 G.A., 76.
49 G.A., 76.
50 G.A., 75.
51 G.A., 75 (italics added).
These emotions are such as to indicate that their "exciting cause," to which they refer, must be personal.

Newman is not saying that conscience or the imperatives of conscience are God — they remain finite and human and fallible — but he is saying that these are the shadow and the evidence of God, the phenomena or the impressions or the experience from which the intellect instinctively moves to the assertion of God.\(^52\) They are the created effect of God, the finite participation in and experience of the sovereignty of God. One has the experience in this command of an undeniable absolute. While conscience is not God, it is, nevertheless, repeatedly named "an echo of God." For finite as it is, it makes a claim upon our lives that is supreme and unsurpassable and omnipresent.

Thus in summary for Newman, both the superiority and perversiveness of the claim of conscience over every other claim disclose the matchless supremacy of this Other to which conscience points, while the attendant emotions evoked by conscience disclose that this Other is already and implicitly recognized as personal.

How is Newman arguing here? Is he saying that we feel obligation and consequently we imply that there must be an all powerful source? Is Newman's God still the God of inference, but now the evidence from which inference moves is the sense of duty? Or is he saying that God is given in the very act of obligation itself? In scholastic terminology, is obligation a \textit{signum quod} of the divine reality or a \textit{signum in quo} — is obligation like smoke from which we infer fire or like a handshake in which we experience friendship?

The answer to this question is not always clear in Newman.\(^53\) But his mind seems to have come down upon the second

\(^{52}\) P.N., 2:53.

\(^{53}\) For the difficulty in understanding Newman's position, see Newman to W. G. Ward (November 26, 1859) \textit{L.D.}, 19:247. See also P.N., 2:53.
alternative with his acknowledgement of "instinct," namely, that by a "singularly congenial" movement, an instinct of the mind "recognizes" God in the imperative of conscience in a manner which parallels, for Newman, the "faith" in an external world. The evidence that there are things external to us is the impression the phenomena make upon our senses, "and our warrant for taking these for evidence is our instinctive certitude that they are evidence." 54 It is through instinct that human beings affirm an external world; it is through instinct that they affirm that God is given in their conscience. This instinctual recognition would explain Newman's contention in the Apologia that there were "two and only two absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator." 55 "Self-evident?" The word is important. Through intuition, the self is given; to the faith that arises out of the instinctive recognition of conscience, God is given. 56

In his Philosophical Notebook, Newman summarized his argument: "If then our <my> knowledge of our <my> existence is brought ** home to me by my consciousness of thinking, and if

54 G.A., 71. Similarly, human beings come by instinct to recognize the character of particular authors — a Cicero or a Jerome — from the phenomena of their writings. See G.A., 72.
55 Apo., 18.
56 James Collins records that in Newman’s private notes, he lists four main reasons for his choice of the proof from conscience, the first of which is indicated here. But Collins adds: "Second, the proof from conscience is not a purely theoretical process and does not stop at a purely abstract truth. Instead, it makes us aware of God at the center of our freedom. It is personal, not only in its point of departure, but also in apprehending God precisely as a personal judge and providential guide. Hence this inference ordinarily yields both a speculative truth and a practical commitment of the finite person to God as a person. It is the source of a moral and religious relationship with God and thus overcomes the deficiencies of the proof from design." See James Collins, God in Modern Philosophy (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1959) 362-363, 444 (n. 47). See P.N., 2:67.
thinking includes as one of its modes conscience or the sense of an imperative coercive law, & if such a sense, when [analyzed, i.e. when] reflected on, involves an inchoate recognition of a Divine Being, it follows that such recognition comes close upon my recognition that I am, and is only not so clear an object of perception as is my own existence."\(^{57}\) And again to W. G. Ward: "Conscience, or the sense of moral obligation on my mind is such, as distinctly to carry with it the sense of an Obliger; or that the immediate shape with which it comes to me is, not that of a divine truth, but of a divine command or will. The immediate form need not be the ultimate basis. I have only said that my conscience is to me a proof of a God, just as a shadow is a proof of a substance. The shadow does not depend upon the mere arbitrary will of the substance for its shape, but on the nature of the substance."\(^{58}\) Conscience always entails a keen sense of obligation and responsibility. God is given to human experience aboriginally as the whence of obligation and the whither of responsibility.

Newman believed that the argument from conscience was the demonstration available to all of humankind, that it lay at the basis of natural religion. Just as the burden of the Grammar of Assent was to assert the justification of the belief of the uneducated, so the argument from conscience extended this justification by making as a principle of religion what was common to all human beings, the unlearned and the learned.\(^{59}\) And the Grammar insisted upon this

\(^{57}\) P.N., 2:63.


\(^{59}\) G.A., 251. It is interesting that Hegel, for vastly different reasons, locates the transition of Spirit into religion in the form of conscience: "Der sich selbst wissende Geist ist in der Religion unmittelbar sein eignes reines selbstbewußtsein. Diejenigen Gestalten desselben, die betrachtet worden, — der wahre, der sich entfremdete und der seiner selbst gewisse Geist — machen zusammen ihn in seinem Bewußtsein aus, das seiner Welt gegenüber treten in ihr sich nicht erkennt. Aber im Gewissen unterwirft er sich wie seine gegenständliche Welt
point: “Our great internal teacher of religion is, as I have said in an earlier part of this Essay, our Conscience. Conscience is a personal guide, and I use it because I must use myself; I am as little able to think by any mind but my own as to breathe with another’s lungs. Conscience is nearer to me than any other means of knowledge. And as it is given to me, so also it is given to others; and being carried about by every individual in his own breast, and requiring nothing besides itself, it is thus adapted for the communication to each separately of that knowledge which is most momentous to him individually, — adapted for the use of all classes and conditions of men, for high and low, young and old, men and women, independently of books, of educated reasoning, of physical knowledge or of philosophy.”

Why is this voice, the voice of conscience an “echo” of the voice of God? Because it is so absolute, so sovereign. It is not God, but it participates in the absoluteness of God. It is “the main guide of the soul,” governing as sovereign everything a person does, surpassing in its government every other claim, and at the same time pervading an entire life — no time and no place escapes its commands. Sunshine implies a sun, even if unseen; knocking on the door implies the presence of one asking for admittance, so

[A Tentative Excursus: If one wished to ask a metaphysical rather than an epistemological question: How, one might inquire, does conscience relate to the causality of God? How does it come forth from God in a manner so precise that it can serve to lay upon human beings the authority of God? As we have insisted, Newman is rich in metaphors and similes, calling it the “echo of a voice,” the “reverberations of an external admonition,” “the shadow” of the substance of God; he compares it to the knocking on the door by someone requesting entrance and to the sunshine or light given by the sun. God not only gives conscience its being, but uniquely specifies its nature. It participates in His absolute authority, without being God. Conscience seems a created participation in or expression of God as sovereign good:, sovereign, as supreme moral ruler; good, as that of which every other created good is exemplified. If this is true, then the activity of conscience resembles in its ontological structure the character of contemplation in John of the Cross, i.e., “the overshadowing” of the attributes of God.\footnote{See John of the Cross, “The Living Flame,” Stanza 3 with Commentary, as in Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodrigues, \textit{The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross} (revised edition, Washington, DC: Institute for Carmelite Studies, 1991) 673ff.]

\textbf{Objection}

But isn’t Newman simply divinizing the superego [\textit{Über-Ich}] of later Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the agency among the triadic agencies of the mind whose functions are both the supervision and the judging and punishing of human deeds? Freud equates the
judging feature of superego with conscience, and, can, like Newman, speak of the "voice of conscience." How similar is the doctrine of Newman to the superego's influence as detailed by Freud: "I feel an inclination to do something that I think will give me pleasure, but I abandon it on the ground that my conscience does not allow it. Or I have let myself be persuaded by too great an expectation of pleasure into doing something to which the voice of conscience has objected and after the deed my conscience punishes me with distressing reproaches and causes me to feel remorse for the deed." Both Newman and Freud have conscience as dictate. And could not Newman's list of the consequences of a bad conscience be equally at home with the catalogue of emotions assigned to Freud's superego: "self-reproach, poignant shame, haunting remorse, chill dismay at the prospect of the future?" Further, the personal is present in these exercises of the superego, maintains Freud, because the superego originates in the internalization by the child of the parental superego or ego-ideal, and it "observes, directs and threatens the ego in exactly the same way as earlier the parents did with the child." Indeed Freud sees the superego as the mechanism that binds aggression, that shapes the renunciation of the outward expression of aggression and turns it inwardly into guilt. "In Freud's oedipal perspective, the renunciation of the instincts (sex and aggression) is motivated by castration anxiety (fear)" that shapes the characterizes the superego.

64 Freud, *New Introductory Lectures, 74-75.*
65 *G.A., 75.*
66 Freud, *New Introductory Lectures, 77.*
67 I am grateful here to Professor Diane Jonte-Pace of Santa Clara University for these summary comments on the origins of the superego and Freud's own criticism of a superego morality.
There is no time adequate here to give this objection the careful examination it deserves, but a number of characteristics might offer some indications that this objection does not pose a definitive end to Newman’s finding the presence of God within the dictates of conscience. Perhaps one could distinguish Newman’s conscience and Freud’s super-ego in terms of four parameters: conscious awareness, rationality, freedom, and dominant emotions. Let us look briefly at each.

One must first recognize, that the Freudian superego or ego-ideal was itself — as conditioning can often be — primarily “unconscious and inaccessible to the ego.”68 This means more than simply producing unconscious effects. It means, as Freud wrote in *The New Introductory Lectures to Psycho-Analysis*, that “large portions of the ego and super-ego can remain unconscious and are normally unconscious. That is to say, the individual knows nothing of their contents and it requires an expenditure of effort to make them conscious.”69 In its unconscious state, Gregory Zilboorg emphasizes, Freud’s superego is the “precipitate of all the demands and commands and particularly of the taboos connected with what is known as ‘the oedipus complex’. ”70 In contrast, Newman’s imperative of conscience is emphatic in its consciousness, following as

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69 Freud, *New Introductory Lectures*, 87. “We call a psychical process unconscious whose existence we are obliged to assume — for some such reason as that we infer it from its effects — but of which we know nothing. In that case we have the same relation to it as we have to a psychical process in another person, except that it is in fact one of our own. If we want to be still more correct, we shall modify our assertion by saying that we call a process unconscious if we are obliged to assume that it is being activated at the moment, though at the moment we know nothing about it.” *Ibid.*, 88.

it does in its indivisible unity with the first moment of conscience, the rational judgment between good and evil. This prior moral judgment is — for all of its attendant emotions, Newman underlines — "a judgment of the reason." Indeed, conscience as a moral sense is "an intellectual sentiment." 

Reason as such has virtually no role to play in the formation or the agency of the superego. It is more a conditioning or compulsion from without, an introjection especially of the father’s authority. Indeed, "Freud usually discusses the superego as oedipal, involving fear of punishment, castration anxiety, and renunciation". But it is brought about and strengthened more generally by the conditioning of parental and societal expectations. One is conditioned to accept certain things and reject others. This stands in contrast with Newman’s rational dictate bearing upon that whose goodness or rationality one has consciously and reasonably recognized. When the super-ego develops into a pathological extreme, it resembles in its exaggerations compulsive hand-washings, obsessive actions to which one is driven by a sense of guilt and whose values obtain simply as a displacement of object and an escape from unrecognized guilt. In some contrast, Newman’s moral commands are a second moment of conscience, the experience of absolute obligation following upon the moral differentiation of good from evil. Moral judgment and moral imperative are distinct aspects of conscience, but only that; the act that unites them into a unity is conscience, and conscience is indivisible. Newman emphasizes that moral judgment and moral imperative are two aspects "of one and the same feeling, exerted upon one

71 G.A., 73.
72 G.A. 5: #1, p. 75.
73 Once more, let me thank Professor Diane Jonte-Pace for this summary articulation of the origin of the superego in the oedipal experience.
74 G.A., 73.
and the same subject-matter." 75 Perhaps it is precisely in this indi-
visibility that the superego and Newman’s conscience so strongly
and evidently differ. The imperatives of conscience follow upon
the rational recognition of good and evil — not upon the uneasy
feeling and compulsive susceptibilities evoked from previous con-
ditioning. If the judgment of right and wrong is not of reason, it is
not of conscience for Newman. In fact, the moral judgments of
conscience and the dictate consequently upon them can sometimes
be at loggerheads with compulsive emotions of attraction or repul-
sion generated by conditioning. Conscience can even contradict the
superego.

In the superego, it is the historical past that dominates, and the
precepts and prohibitions about the present or the future come out
of the earliest object choices desired by the id. 76 These dictates
bring as prohibitions into the present the parental ego-ideals and
the guilt and threat one has undergone repeatedly in the past when
these ideals were threatened or not realized. Newman’s conscience
speaks to freedom, to an experience of self-responsibility or self-
determination, while the superego speaks to and evokes constraints
and past conditioning. The person, moved by conscience to act,
feels called, summoned, directed to follow the actions she recog-
nizes as right or good. As she confronts this choice, she will have
a radical sense of her own freedom, of her responsibility for what
she deliberates about and chooses; indeed, the responsibility for
her entire life.

75 G.A., 75. Newman has placed the contradictory in a contrary to fact sen-
tence.

76 Freud, The Ego and the Id, 31: The origin of the super-ego is “the outcome
of two highly important factors, one of a biological and the other of a historical
nature: namely, the lengthy duration in man of his childhood helplessness and
dependence, and the fact of his Oedipus complex, the repression of which we have
shown to be connected with the interruption of libidinal development by the
latency period and so with diphasic onset of man’s sexual life.”
As conscience and the superego are different in the character of their command, so they are different in the emotions they principally evoke. For Newman’s conscience, the principal emotion was fear; for Freud’s superego, the principal emotion was shame and guilt. In the *Idea of a University*, Newman was at pains to distinguish his sense of conscience and its religious significance from the disgust, humiliation and shame that come over the cultivated, but conditioned mind when it realizes its self-betrayal into vice. “When the mind is simply angry with itself and nothing more, surely the true import of the voice of nature and the depth of its intimations have been forgotten, and a false philosophy has misinterpreted emotions which ought to lead to God. “Fear implies the transgression of a law, and a law implies a lawgiver and judge,” but the tendency of “intellectual culture is to swallow up the fear in the self-reproach, and the self-reproach is directed and limited to our mere sense of what is fitting and becoming. Fear carries us out of ourselves, whereas shame may act upon us only within the round of our own thoughts.”\(^77\) John Glaser has, consequently, pointed out that the characteristic of the superego is its narcissism: the need to be right, correct so that one is approvable, lovable. The shame resulting from the violation of previous conditioning entails the fear of isolation, of being abandoned because one is not lovable. “The thematic center is a sense of one’s own value.”\(^78\)

One need not deny that conscience in Newman’s sense can be and often initially is mingled and confused with the superego — just as true worship and prayer often embody many false and superstitious practices without themselves being superstitious, or as a false prophet can for a time be indistinguishable from a true

\(^77\) *Idea*, 165.

\(^78\) John W. Glaser, “Conscience and Superego: A Key Distinction,” *Theological Studies* 32 (1971) 38. The remarks above on the difference between conscience and super-ego are very indebted to Glaser’s article.
prophet. Even further, one need not deny that the conditioning that is the superego can command and habituate one to practices that conscience will demand and confirm. But it is obviously of crucial importance to distinguish them. Newman argues that the experience of responsibility and fear are both interpersonal, i.e., that both of these feelings essentially involve another person: "If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us, we fear."\(^7\) Such feelings as moral obligation before duty and fear before transgression "require for their exciting cause an intelligent being." The absolute character of the imperative indicate the sovereign character of this other. So the mind spontaneously recognizes "the phenomena of Conscience, as a dictate, avail to impress the imagination with the picture of a Supreme Governor, a Judge, holy, just, powerful, all-seeing, retributive, and is the creative principle of religion."\(^8\) If conscience, containing both this experience and its recognition, stands as the principle, the source of all religious affirmation, then it becomes critically important for Newman's reading of the rise of atheism. It is important to note that Newman — in contrast with the quinque viae of St. Thomas or the solar system with Newton or the contingency of matter with Samuel Clarke or physical design with Paley — offers as the principal evidence for the reality of God an experience that is intrinsically religious. God is given with conscience. Conscience would have to be corrupted in order to corrupt belief in the reality of God. That means that the loss of a sense of God can fundamentally only be moral.

\(^7\) *G.A.*, 76.
\(^8\) *G.A.*, 76.
Part Four: Rejected Alternatives

But what about other sources in nature that would offer warrant or demonstration for the existence of God? Truth to tell, Newman reposed very little credence in the other two natural informants about God, ones commonly cited in the apologetic manuals of his time, and this reserve indicates how much foundational importance he was ascribing to the witness of conscience.

The first of these was that of universal consensus, one embodied in the rites and devotions and practices extant in the history of religions. One must here identify religion in its primitive state, founded on a sense of sin, structured with precepts that reflect this origin, and requiring expiation, reconciliation, and some great change in human conduct. Such religion was the natural, albeit primitive, expression of conscience. Later developments, the religions of civilized times and those of philosophy, are not developments of this primordial religion but its perversion or contradiction, “recognizing a moral sense — ethics — but ignoring conscience.” This is but “artificial religion,” issuing only out of a development of the human intellect, “a one-sided progress of mind,” and a contradiction to the fundamental religious principle, conscience.

The third natural informant, celebrated in the theologies that issued from the mechanics of the previous century and synthesized in such works as Paley’s Natural Theology lay with the world of nature, the system of the universe, its order and precision. It includes both human life and human affairs. But what actually strikes the mind confronted with the course of nature is not the presence of God, but His absence — the dismay “that His control of this living world is so indirect and His action so obscure. This is the first lesson that we gain from the course of human affairs.

82 G.A., 254-255.
What strikes the mind so forcibly and so painfully is, his absence, (if I may so speak) from His own world.”

It is true, as Edward Sillem notes, that Newman admitted the demonstrative value of arguments from the material universe, but “he held, that if these arguments are not regarded as corollaries to the argument from conscience, they are of no religious value.” Before the world of nature alone, one confronts not the voice of God as in conscience, but the silence of God. “It is a silence that speaks. It is as if an other had got possession of His work.” For in this world of system and pattern, God does not appear and a thousand “why’s” come out of human experience with nature: Why does God not give us more immediate knowledge of His reality? Why does He allow events to move in their observed way without divine order? Why is He not more forthcoming about Himself, His will, His providence? God does not appear. “On the contrary, He is specially ‘a Hidden God;’ and with our best efforts we can only glean from the surface of the world some faint and fragmentary views of Him.”

Only human conscience can give answers to the questions posed by nature, not nature itself. Before this hiddenness of God in nature and in the course of human events, Newman saw only two alternatives: either God did not exist or God has disowned His creation. For Newman, it was a “great question whether atheism is not as philosophically consistent with the phenomena of the physical world, taken by themselves, as the doctrine of a creative and governing Power.” The religious question is whether physical phenomena teach human beings or remind human beings of the

83 G.A., 255-256.
84 P.N., 2:32 (n. 6). Sillem lists the various places in Newman’s writing where one can find substantiation for this claim.
85 G.A., 256.
86 G.A., 256.
reality of God. If they do not, the lack lies with the dispositions of the person, with his or her failure to bring to bear those moral principles by which these data may be interpreted religiously.\textsuperscript{87} The religious interpretation must be made to tell in the theological assessment of nature because “I believe that the study of Nature, when religious feeling is away, leads the mind, rightly or wrongly, to acquiesce in the atheistic theory, as the simplest and easiest.”\textsuperscript{88} Even if one is successful in inferring from the data of the physical sciences the existence of divine power and divine skill, none of them can teach God as Moral Governor: “The essence of Religion is the idea of a Moral Governor and a particular Providence; now let me ask, is the doctrine of moral governance and a particular providence conveyed to us through the physical sciences at all?”\textsuperscript{89} This gave the consistent direction to his apologetics: “For myself, as my writings show, I have never based the belief in a God on any argument from merely external nature, but simply as implied in the fact and deductible from the existence of conscience, nor do I see any difficulty in the notion of the existence of a being endued with reason (at least in its lower degrees) yet without a conscience.” Indeed, Newman would go further and make conscience the condition for the possibility of belief: “\textit{Because} he had no conscience, he would have no idea of a God.”\textsuperscript{90}

This reservation ran contrary to the physico-theologies of the time, i.e., to the argument from Newton’s universe and Paley’s


watch which had made the arguments from the material universe primary. But against those heady days of a foundational unity between science and religion, Newman had learned a lesson from ancient philosophy, "this remarkable fact in the history of heathen Greece against the former supposition, that her most eminent empirical philosophers were atheists, and that it was their atheism which was the cause of their eminence."91 And in what did their atheism consist, the atheism of Democritus and Epicurus? The denial of providence, of final causes within the universe, of God or mind dwelling within and directing the universe. Newman relied upon Bacon's analysis for this tendency towards atheism among mechanical philosophers or physicists: "Physical philosophers are ever inquiring *whence* things are, not *why*; referring them to nature, not to mind; and thus they tend to make a system a substitute for a God."92 Contrary to the attempts to search science and physical investigations for foundational assertion about the existence of God, Newman counseled: "From religious investigations, as such, physics must be excluded, and from physical, as such, religion; and if we mix them, we shall spoil both. The theologian, speaking of Divine Omnipotence, for the time simply ignores the laws of nature as existing restraints upon its exercise; and the physical philosopher, on the other hand, in his experiments upon natural phenomena, is simply ascertaining those laws, putting aside the question of that Omnipotence."93

The celebrated attempts of the seventeenth and eighteenth century to found religion on physics received from Newman what must pass as one of his most sardonic comments: "There are religious experimentalists, though physics, taken by themselves, tend

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93 *Idea*, 189.
to infidelity; but to have recourse to physics to make men religious is like recommending a canonry as a cure for the gout, or giving a youngster a commission as a penance for irregularities.”\textsuperscript{94} It is not that all argument from the world of nature and from its order is intrinsically false; it is that few are capable of such an argument and fewer still to build religious belief upon it.

The results could be paradoxical: Make religion — as one does in these physico-theologies — the conclusion of inference and you will undermine it: “To most men argument makes the point in hand only more doubtful, and considerably less impressive. 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... Life is not long enough for a religion of inferences.”\textsuperscript{95}

Science and literature may strengthen one’s religious beliefs, but the foundations for such convictions must be what is direct and precise within human experience, and for human beings what is most direct, what is most given in and by conscience.\textsuperscript{96} Writing from Rome in 1847, Newman summarized to J. D. Dalgairns his very nuanced evaluation of the apologetics of the time: “(1) I hold reason can prove the being of a God — that such a conclusion is the legitimate result of reason well employed... but this is very


\textsuperscript{95} \textit{G.A.}, 66-67.

\textsuperscript{96} Perhaps, again, the opponent in so many ways most parallel in his reflections to Newman is Friedrich Nietzsche: “Why atheism today? The ‘Father’ in God is thoroughly refuted, likewise the ‘judge’ and the ‘rewarder’. Also his ‘free will’ — he does not hear us, and even if he heard us he could not help. The worst of it is that he seems to be incapable of communicating clearly. Is he unclear? — This is what I have found out from many questions and conversations as to the cause of the decline of European theism. It seems to me that the religious instinct is growing powerfully, but is rejecting theistic gratification with deep distrust.” \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}, translated with an introduction by Marianne Cowan, A Gateway Edition (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1955) #53, p. 60.
different from saying that reason is the *mode* by which individuals come at truth. (2) Next I have denied that the argument *from design* is philosophically true — has the Holy See condemned this? if so, of course I retract it — but else I say the philosophical argument of reason for the being of God is, not from external nature, but from the *law of conscience*.97

If Europe, then, was to lose its sense of God, that loss must come through a corruption of conscience. “Conscience may be *deadened,*” Newman wrote to Baron Friedrich von Hugel. The accepted practices of the vendetta, for example, could as the customs of the country leave one in “invincible ignorance” that cruelty was wrong.98 As early as his study of the *Arians of the Fourth Century,* Newman had maintained that “infidelity is a positive, not a negative state; it is a state of profaneness, pride, and selfishness; and he who believes a little, but encompasses that little with the invention of men, is undeniably in a better condition than he who blots out from his mind both the human inventions, and that portion of truth which was concealed in them.” In this way, one could understand how Origen was willing to deal in friendly interchange with the pagan philosophers in Alexandria, but avoided deliberate heretics and apostates. Ignorance of God is not simply ignorance, an error of understanding or judgment. The loss of a sense of God could only be moral.99

**Part Five: The Infallible Church**

All of this could happen because the intellect alone was not enough to secure the primacy of conscience and its mediation of

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97 Newman to J. D. Dalgairnes (February 14, 1847), *L.D.*, 12:34.
the existence of God. After sin and within the fallen state of human beings, nothing less than a divine intervention could steady human beings in their recognition of a divine voice within the moral imperative, or could bring them continually and resolutely before that which was already present within them. So much countered this mediation of God through conscience: the voice of conscience was a demand for an austere subjection and obedience even in the face of passionate self-interest, deception, the myriad conflicts within motivation; the liberty claimed in some intellectual movements and championed by much in the culture was an antimony or a spontaneity of human reason that in the absorptions of personal gratification, indulgence and self-complacency could become illusion and rebellion. Before such massive counters, Newman was pessimistic about the success of conscience to remain intact.

What could destroy conscience as the voice of God, as the primordial witness to God? The gradual erosion of religion through the overextended claims of the autonomous reason, the reduction of God and the things that pertain to God to the dimensions of human understanding and expectations. At first nothing changes: the external practices are maintained and the moral content of an ethical code unaltered. But gradually and imperceptibly a sea change in the understanding of conscience occurs. It is no longer a response to the demands of another; it becomes a response to what one demands of herself. As mentioned previously, conscience in its religious usage can evoke fear as well as shame. Conscience as cultivated moral sentiment can evoke only shame: “Fear carries us out of ourselves, whereas shame may act upon us only within the round of our own thoughts.” The autonomous reason severs a dependence upon God at this deepest level of human choice, leaving intact the moral life itself virtually unchanged initially. The moral life is no longer an obedience to the command of God. Gradually, then, over time and with the increased exile of religion to
formalities and the peripheries of life. It seems appropriate here to
cite a text already considered: "conscience tends to become what is
called the moral sense; the command of duty is a sort of taste; sin
is not an offence against God, but against human nature."\textsuperscript{100} Perhaps
one could say that infidelity, in Newman's sense of that word, can
begin when the superego subsumes the place of conscience.

For conscience does not cease to exist, but it becomes self-
respect. When one offends against it, shame is evoked by a sense
of being a fool rather than a sinner. The religious character of
conscience dies by a substitution, done so easily under the imperi-
alism of the intellect, of an autonomous moral sense or taste,
responsible only to itself, for an obligation commanded and sanc-
tioned by another. Moral life becomes only ethical, not religious;
conscience became, quite literally, godless. Edward Gibbon drew
the outlines of such an individual figure with his depiction in Julian,
of a "godless intellectualism" that was "an historical fulfillment of
his own idea of moral perfection."\textsuperscript{101}

As Europe moved towards its increasing distance from real con-
victions about the religious, about the divine and effective presence
or imperative within human life, various expedients had been
attempted "to arrest fierce willful human nature in its onward
course, and to bring it into subjection." But what could have the
"force and the toughness necessary to be a breakwater against the
deluge?"\textsuperscript{102} The political establishment of national churches in
various countries in Europe was attempted, but this was giving way
before its own ineffectuality.\textsuperscript{103}

Education was another expedient, and in 1841 Sir Robert Peel
and Lord Brougham had launched a program which maintained

\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Idea}, 165.
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Idea}, 169.
\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Apo.}, 219.
\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Apo.}, 219.
"That the claims of religion could be secured and sustained in the mass of men, and in particular in the lower classes of society, by acquaintance with literature and physical science, and through the instrumentality of Mechanics’ Institutes and Reading Rooms.” Newman found this a dream and a delusion. It reduced religion to conclusions and opinions, neither of which will sustain human conviction under the demands and allurements of life. Both strategies substituted notional assent about propositions for the concrete realities to which religious and real assent is given: “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. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us. Many a man will live and die upon a dogma: no man will be a martyr for a conclusion.”

Newman would extend the same judgment to Sacred Scripture itself, even while insisting that its source is God and its reading grace. It has proven historically idle to attempt to make of the bible an instrument for which it was never intended, i.e. a continual response to the skeptical human intellect, infinite in the varieties of doubts that it fosters and passionate in the urgency with which self-seeking can give those doubts form and substance. “A book, after all, cannot make a stand against the wild living intellect of man, and in this day it [Scripture] begins to testify, as regards its own structure and contents, to the power of that universal solvent, which is so successfully acting upon religious establishments.”

Philosophic and literary religion becomes liberalism, the anti-dogmatic religious movement against which Newman spent his life; scriptural religion became evangelicalism, which played directly into the hands of the liberals.”

105 Apo., 219.
106 Apo., 39-40. “I thought little of the Evangelicals as a class. I thought they played into the hands of the Liberals.”
divine intervention that was more than human inference and sentiment on one side and a book on the other. In terms of this, Newman understood the incarnation of the Son of God and the continuation of his authoritative teaching in an infallible Church.

What did Newman mean by an infallible Church? “I would rather word the question thus,” he wrote, “‘Can I be certain that God is true and that God has spoken?’ And I prefer to put it in this shape, because I understand what is meant better, while I think it is the real interpretation of any thing which I hold myself about the Church’s infallibility.”

The present infidelity was a “moral epidemic, and it is likely to have its course. While it lasts, argument is useless... Personal experience of the power of the Gospel is our great, or our only defense from scepticism. Argument is of little use. Beyond this inward evidence, an Infallible Church is the main external safeguard — But when minds are wilful, there is no safeguard at all.

This conviction brought Newman to an understanding of the moral need for an infallible Church, paradoxically one of the most scandalous features of the Catholic Church for Victorian England. The Church was the continuation of the presence of Christ, an abiding reminder of the religious, of the involvement of God at the deepest level of human life, an involvement that was both sustaining, transforming, and correcting the movement of the intellectual and passionate appetites of human beings. For the Church — with all of the distinctions and caveats upon which Newman could insist and at great length — could speak on fundamental religious issues in the name and by the authority of God.

For Newman, it was the charism of infallibility which gave the Church its meaning, its manner of teaching and action, and its

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107 Newman to Frank Scott Haydon (April 24, 1858), L.D., 18:333-334.
108 Newman to J. R. Bloxam (February 20, 1883), L.D., 30:186. See also Apo., 219-220.
peculiar mission to the world. "Supposing then it to be the Will of
the Creator to interfere in human affairs, and to make provisions
for retaining in the world a knowledge of Himself, so definite and
distinct as to be proof against the energy of human scepticism... there is nothing to surprise the mind, if He should think fit to intro-
duce a power into the world, invested with the prerogative of infal-
libility in religious matters. Such a provision would be a direct,
immediate, active, and prompt means of withstanding the diffi-
culty;... And thus I am brought to speak of the Church's infallibil-
ity, as a provision, adapted by the mercy of the Creator, to preserve
religion in the world, and to restrain that freedom of thought, which
of course in itself is one of the greatest of our natural gifts, and to
rescue it from its own suicidal excesses."\textsuperscript{109}

As a response to the religious self-destruction of human kind,
then, Newman articulates both a transcendental and categorical
witness to the reality of God. Transcendentally, there is the author-
itative witness of conscience, innate and supreme in every human
being, pervasively present through every human choice, and
strengthened and perfected because interiorly transformed by the
grace of the indwelling Spirit. Categorically, there is the authorita-
tive witness of the church, the extension or body of Christ, pro-
claiming with certitude the fundamental creed and morality of the
Christian community and the involvement of God within human
life — "the great elementary truths" — in such a way as legiti-
mately to demand a response in absolute faith, a community sent
to and safeguarded in its definitive proclamation by divine mandate
and the Spirit of Christ.

Only such a power, contended Newman, could counter those
beginnings of error, of religious skepticism and self-interest, and
gradual disengagement, whose organic and ultimate effect is to

\textsuperscript{109} Apo., 219-220.
undermine all religious belief in any divine involvement within human life. On the other hand, one could diminish the religious nature of conscience by destroying any such authoritative ecclesial voice by which it could be sustained and safeguarded. And this diminishment of an authoritative church, the substitution of religious sentiment for dogma, had marked European scepticism. The rise of complete disbelief, the rise of atheism, was but the organic development of such a diminishment.

For just as there is an organic development of doctrine, so there is an organic devolution of belief. The Grammar of Assent traced out one such movement as example: “The third [person] gradually subsided into infidelity, because he started with the Protestant dogma, cherished in the depth of his nature, that a priesthood was a corruption of the simplicity of the Gospel. First, then, he would protest against the sacrifice of the Mass; next he gave up baptismal regeneration, and the sacramental principle; then he asked himself whether dogmas were not a restraint on Christian liberty as well as sacraments; then came the question, what after all was the use of teachers of religion? Why should any one stand between him and his Maker? After a time it struck him, that this obvious question had to be answered by the Apostles, as well as by the Anglican clergy; so he came to the conclusion that the true and only revelation of God to man is that which is written on the heart. This did for a time, and he remained a Deist. But then it occurred to him, that this inward moral law was there within the breast, whether there was a God or not, and that it was a round about way of enforcing that law, to say that it came from God, and simply unnecessary, considering that it carried with it its own sacred and sovereign authority, as our feelings instinctively testified; and when he turned to look at the physical world around him, he really did not see what scientific proof there was there of the Being of God at all, and it seemed to him as if all things would go on quite as well as
at present, without that hypothesis as with it; so he dropped it, and became *a purus, putus* Atheist."

The only external power that can inhibit the beginnings of such decline, one that could insist upon the intimate and demanding intervention of God within human life, is an historical church which can definitively and continually over the centuries formulate or proclaim the Christian creed and authoritatively decide if a new articulation of the faith of this community is its faithful translation into another idiom. Only a community under such a mandate to preach and to summon to belief and assured of an indwelling divine assistance could morally ask for faith in its most fundamental doctrine.

This is not the place to explore the relationship in Newman between ecclesiology and belief, but only to note that they are inextricably united. Both conscience and the church, in variously different ways and modalities, speak authoritatively to the Christian awareness and in so doing mediate — again in vastly different ways and modalities — the reality of God. Dismiss either of them, maintained Newman, and there is no logical pausing in religious disintegration until one reaches total disbelief in the existence of God. This was the pattern that Newman saw in the atheism emerging in his own time and reaching a pervasive presence in the century which was opening before him.

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110 *G.A.*, 160-161.