

# Grammar of Assent Part II - Assent and Inference

## Chapter VI: Assent Considered As Unconditional

By Peter Trahan

### 2. Complex Assent

Newman clarifies the simple assent he has been discussing so far with these qualifiers:

it is “**absolute, complete, unconditional, arbitrary, and in many cases exercised *unconsciously***”

Moreover, he says:

“A great many of our assents are merely expressions of our **personal likings, tastes, principles, motives, and opinions**, as dictated by nature, or resulting from **habit**; in other words they are acts and **manifestations of self**.”

“That mode of assent which is exercised thus unconsciously, I may call ***simple assent***.”

“Now I am going to speak of such assents as must be made **consciously and deliberately**, and which I shall call **complex or reflex** assents.”

“Acts of inference are both the antecedents of assent before assenting, and its usual concomitants after assenting.”

This last statement calls to mind his formulation from chapter 1, so here is a quick review from chapter 1:

#### Part 1: The 3 Modes of Holding Propositions

- 1) **Interrogatives** (*questions* are expressions of doubts). Yes or No. Doubt. “Does free trade benefit the poorer classes?”
- 2) **Conditionals**. (*conclusions* are expressions of act of inferences). Arguments. Persuasion. Inference. May must or should. “Free trade therefore benefits the poorer classes.”
- 3) **Categorical**. (*assertions* are the expressions of an act of assent). Commands. Without conditions. Assent. “Free trade does benefit.”

These 3 modes of proposition follow a natural sequence:

1. *Question (acts of doubt)* → 2. *Conclusion (acts of inference)* → 3. *Assertion (acts of assent)*

Newman is clear on this point that inferences “naturally” lead to assent. He has answered this question many times. In part 1 of chapter 6 he asserts that “probable reasoning can lead to certitude.”



## The Example of the Island of Great Britain

In this example Newman aims to show how doubt has no part in assent (which is further reason why I think he means to be saying that assents are unequivocal rather than unconditional)

Newman believes that Great Britain is an island, due to “certain sufficient reasons” (conditions?). But if he forgets these reasons (conditions?) he may nevertheless retain his assent. In retaining his assent he may investigate (but not doubt, or “inquire”) his previous assent so as to regain those “certain sufficient reasons.”

Or, perhaps he never had “sufficient reasons” at all, but yet assented (for whatever reason) and now seeks to “ascertain the producible evidence in its favor” and bring his “assent to conclusion.”

**This investigation implies no doubt about the assent, whereas an “inquiry” does imply doubt.**

“We cannot without absurdity call ourselves at once believers and inquirers also. Thus it is sometimes spoken of as a hardship that a Catholic is not allowed to inquire into the truth of his Creed; - of course he cannot, if he would retain the name of believer.”

“If he is seeking he has not found.”

(note: In short, St. Anselm's “faith seeking understanding” must therefore be an investigation, not an inquiry)

“Inquiry implies doubt... investigation does not... those who assent to a doctrine or fact may without inconsistency investigate its credibility, though they cannot literally inquire about its truth.”

(note: I suppose this means I may in faith ask why something is true but cannot ask whether it is true)

Investigations are “necessary obligations,” and “a law of nature” like the growth of “childhood into manhood.”

## Are assents and inference compatible?

Again, in an attempt to distinguish assent (which has no part in doubt) as something distinct from inference (which does include doubt) Newman sets out to give an explanation:

**“But the question before us is whether acts of assent and of inference are compatible.”**

“My vague consciousness of the possibility of a reversal of my belief in the course of my researches, as little interferes with the honesty and firmness of that belief while those researches proceed, as the recognition of the possibility of my train's oversetting is an evidence of an intention on my part of undergoing so great a calamity. My mind is not moved by a **scientific computation** of chances, nor can any law of averages affect my particular case. To incur a risk is not to expect reverse; and if my opinions are true, I have a right to think they will bear examining. Nor, on the other hand, does belief, viewed in its idea, imply a positive resolution in the party believing never to abandon that belief. **What belief, as such, does imply is, not an**

**intention never to change, but the utter absence of all thought, expectation, or fear of changing.** A spontaneous resolution never to change is inconsistent with the idea of belief; for the very force and absoluteness of the act of assent precludes any such resolution. We do not commonly determine not to do what we cannot fancy ourselves ever doing. We should readily indeed make such a formal promise if we were called upon to do so; for, since we have the truth, and truth cannot change, how can we possibly change in our belief?" (\*1)

## Assents as prejudices:

"Our first assents, right or wrong, are often little more than prejudices." Sometimes these assents "give way" to the force of arguments and we "doubt the matters which we propose to consider, that is, in a suspension of the assents hitherto familiar to us."

"then the assent goes."

and "the **new assent** differs from the old in this, that it has the strength of explicitness and deliberation (conditional propositions?), that it is **not a mere prejudice.... It is an assent, not only to a given proposition, but to the claim of that proposition on our assent as true;** it is an assent to an assent, or what is commonly called a **conviction.**" (\*2)

Newman here asserts that to claim that "Great Britain is an island" and then to pronounce "that 'Great Britain is an island' is true" is "trifling." (\*3)

## Perception, Certitude, Certainty, and Knowledge

"Given an objective truth, the **assent may be called a perception**, the conviction a certitude, the proposition or truth a certainty, or thing known, or a matter of knowledge, and **to assent to it is to know.**" (\*4)

Newman says, "**No one will with justice consider himself certain of any matter, unless he has sufficient reasons for so considering.**" (\*5)

"Certitude is the knowledge of a truth" (\*6)

"Certitude is the perception of a truth with the perception that it is a truth, or the consciousness of knowing, as expressed in the phrase, 'I know that I know,' or 'I know that I know that I know,' - or simply 'I know;' for one reflex assertion of the mind about self sums up the series of self-consciousnesses without the need of any actual evolution of them." (\*7)

## Cases where we adhere to propositions without certitude

### The Case of the Disputants:

Newman gives the example of disputants, however bold in their rival accounts, nevertheless who fail to express their account decisively. This shows that their belief does not “come up to the mark of certitude.”

### **The Case of Miracles:**

Newman says that the belief in miracles is mostly “only a matter of opinion” and when believed is “not believed to the exclusion of all doubt.” (\*8)

### **The Case of Impatience with Contradiction:**

“I mean irritation and impatience of contradiction, vehemence of assertion, determination to silence others – these are the tokens of a mind which has not yet attained the tranquil enjoyment of certitude.”

“Those who are certain of a fact are indolent disputants; it is enough for them that they have the truth; and they have little disposition, except at the call of duty, to criticize the hallucinations of others, and much less are they angry at their positiveness or ingenuity in argument; but to call names, to impute motives, to accuse of sophistry, to be impetuous and overbearing, is the part of men who are alarmed for their own position, and fear to have it approached too nearly.”

**“Intellectual anxiety is incompatible with certitude, as if our highest assent were only an inference.”**

“Appealing to others for their suffrage in behalf of the truths of which we are so sure ... is like our asking another whether we are weary and hungry, or have eaten and drunk to our satisfaction.” (\*9)

### **What Certitude Positively Is: It is a Feeling**

“It is a feeling of satisfaction and self-congratulation, of intellectual security, arising out of a sense of success, attainment, possession, finality, as regards the matter which has been in question.”

Just “as the performance of what is [morally] right is distinguished by .. religious peace, so the attainment of what is true is attested by this intellectual security.”

This “token of certitude” is never “found to attend upon simple assent, on processes of inference, or on doubt; nor on conjecture, opinion, or any other state of mind, besides certitude.”

Certitude is **not** “**mere knowing**, that is, the perception of things, but to the consciousness of having that knowledge.” (\*10)

“Indeed, as far as I can see, the pleasure of perceiving truth without reflecting on it as truth, is not very different ... from the pleasure, as such, of assent or belief given to what is not true...”

from the pleasure of the mere passive reception of recitals or narratives, which neither profess to be true nor claim to be believed.” ...

“And so too as to such statements as gain from us a half-assent, as superstitious tales, stories of magic, of romantic crime, of ghosts ... - the pleasure resulting from these is that of novelty or curiosity.”(note: earlier in this chapter Newman speaks of the impossibility of a half-assent and says he knows of no such thing as an assent that is not given unreservedly.)

**Certitude consists in “that triumphant repose of mind after a struggle.”**

The pursuit of knowledge is a special pleasure (of investigation and discovery) which belongs to inference as contrasted with assent. But “**certitude is a sentiment of its own.**”

(notes follow on next page)

**\*Note 1:** This seems to further confirm what I said earlier, that Newman really means by “unconditional,” to say “unequivocal” since the “truth” that we assent to, we do so, not “without reason,” but “without doubt,” for it is precisely lack of doubts, not conditions, that he describes when he says belief implies “the utter absence of all thought, expectation, or fear of changing.”

When he says that we cannot “fancy ourselves ever ... [changing our belief]” he is speaking of the unequivocal nature of our belief, not the unconditional nature of our belief, which is what I believe he has really meant all along.

Notice also his use of the phrase, “scientific computation” which further supports my previous point about the real difference between inference, which is computation, and assent, which “is not moved” by such.

**\*Note 2:** There might seem to be contradiction here, for suddenly assents are suspended and doubted, but notice that once the doubt enters, “then the assent goes.” Again, this remains consistent with the formulation of an assent as unequivocal, or without doubt insofar as it “goes” once doubt comes. But I still see a problem here coming with this bit about predicating “is true” to a proposition.

**\*Note 3:** This seems to contradict his position in chapter 2 that there is a significant distinction in the the proposition that “lucern is medicago sativa” and “that lucern is medicago sativa is true.”

Indeed, it was his entire position in that chapter that there was a significant distinction because a child may well apprehend the predicate of the latter without apprehending the predicate of the former, and moreover, that the assent to the latter is “stronger” than the former. This was the whole basis of his argument that the real is stronger than the notional insofar as a child would assent to yet a further formulation if it were predicated that “my mother's word, that lucern is medicago sativa is true.”

Now he calls such differences in predication “trifling” and says that the “the first reflexion contains all the rest.” (which is exactly what I said in response to his claims otherwise in chapter 2 regarding medicago sativa as I noted a reference to Frank Ramsey's redundancy theory of truth which lays out the objection quite clearly).

**\*Note 4:** Here Newman describes assent as both as a perception and as knowledge, which is confusing.. The immediate question arises, what is the difference, with regard to assent, between having a perception, and having knowledge?

If the “assent may be called a perception” and “to assent is to know” it seems the application of a simple syllogism forces us to admit that perception is knowledge. Is that what he means to say? He maintained in the first part of this chapter that “recognition” is distinct from knowledge. Is recognition and perception different? How so?

**\*Note 5:** And yet an assent is “unconditional” and “arbitrary” as we noted at the beginning of this section. Therefore when I assent (unconditionally and arbitrarily) I cannot with justice consider myself certain of that to which I assent (lest I consider these unconditional, arbitrary reasons “sufficient”). Indeed, our assents thus far have been “arbitrary” and “unconditional,” although we apparently hold

them “without doubt” and somehow also without “certainty.”

**\*Note 6:** But earlier we saw that (it seemed) assent and certitude were not the same, and yet an assent was described as “to know” whereas here it is certitude which is defined as “knowledge.” And we cannot complain that it is different to know and to know that we know because we were told that “one reflex sums up the series.” What, for example, can be the distinction between “to know” and “to know a truth?” Is the latter summed up in the former? Is this new predication trifling?

Further, if the proposition, “lucern is medicago sativa” represents a truth, then perhaps the proposition, “lucern is medicago sativa is true” represents a certitude? And yet, to pronounce “that 'Great Britain is an island' is true” is “trifling.” So maybe not. Besides, the proposition, “lucern is medicago sativa is true” was given as an example of an assent and so far the definitions of assents and certitude seem paradoxically incompatible, yet strikingly similar all at the same time.

And if we go back and observe that certitude has been formulated as a perception of a perception we must immediately recall this business that “one reflex sums up the series” and that these self-reflective distinctions between perception and perceptions of perceptions (or knowing and knowing that I know) are trifling. Except that they aren't, depending on which paragraph we are in and whether medicago sativa is involved.

**\*Note 7:** He asserts that this is so, without providing any evidence or supporting arguments, but we have an entire science of self-referential propositions and systems of second-order logic that suggest not merely that this assertion is not true, but that there is much, much more to be said on this matter.

**\*Note 8:** Recall the fact that “opinion” is listed as one of his types of assents in chapter 4 and is also described as a “conviction” and that he just used the term, “conviction” to describe a “certitude” and that he previously said that he cannot imagine the possibility of a half-assent and says he knows of no such thing as an assent that is not given unreservedly. It should be clear from all of this that what he now means by “belief” is something other than assent. It must follow then that we cannot assent to propositions regarding miracles, though we may believe, with some doubt, in these propositions. Is this what he means to say?

**\*Note 9:** here again the distinction he is making is that assent is unequivocal, not that it is unconditional. My hunger is unequivocal, and yet is conditioned on my not having eaten. I disagree with Newman that because my not having eaten is not a formal proposition that my not having eaten is not a condition for my hunger. In so saying that my hunger is conditioned I in no way therefore infer my hunger. My hunger remains apart and distinct from inference, but my hunger is very “conditional.”

**\*Note 10:** Knowing is equivalent to perception? And what of the knowing that I know and the fact that “one reflex assertion of the mind about self sums up the series of self-consciousnesses without the need of any actual evolution of them.” He said earlier that it is enough to say, “I know” and that this “sums up the series” such that to say, “I know that I know” is “unnecessary.” But if it is unnecessary, what of “mere knowing?” Is not mere knowing the same as “I know” which he has informed us already sums up I know that I know?