

Chapter IX The Illative Sense

by Peter Trahan

Newman says that he is not concerned with how certitude comes about, which is a metaphysical concern. Newman says he is instead concerned with the more practical fact that certitude is in fact felt.

Newman compares our sense of certitude to our sense of beauty, or our common sense, or good sense.

- Certitude is a mental state.
- Certitude is not a passive impression made upon the mind by argumentative compulsion.
- Certitude is an active recognition of propositions as true.
- Reason bids us be certain by absolute proof which can never be furnished by the logic of words.

Newman suggests that there is an unavoidable recognition of God's will expressed in the structure of the universe and the law of the mind.

This sense of certitude he calls the **Illative Sense**, or, the reasoning faculty.

He gives as example the sense of morality and justice, which no theory or law can fully capture. Each person has recourse to an inner phronesis (knowledge) within himself. In matters of virtue it is this recourse to one's living rule ("a living, present authority), not "the dead letter of treatise or code" that is authoritative.

"Thus it is, and not by science, that he perfects the virtues of justice, self-command, magnanimity, generosity, gentleness, and all others. Phronesis is the regulating principle of every one of them."

Newman notes that we possess mastery of the many virtues in unequal measure, as we possess talents and skills unequally. He asks therefore why logic should be the one single virtue of ratiocination. As there is no single rule which determines once and for all and at the same time for poetry, medicine and warfare, the Illative Sense (a talent for certitude?) cannot be reduced to the dead rule of logical inferences.

As with the arts and the virtues, there is no sufficient test – of poetical excellence, heroic action, or gentlemen-like conduct – to measure these by, other than the particular mental faculty which is its living rule. Our duty in these cases is to do our best to strengthen and perfect this living faculty which is our only rule in these matters. As it is in these examples, it is with the Illative Sense.

The mind is more versatile than language and can determine what science cannot. The living mind does not judge by diagram.

"The mind contemplates without the use of words, by a process which cannot be analyzed."

Whereas in earlier chapters Newman admitted that there is a want for a method that will supply a common measure between mind and mind, he concludes that there is no such measure (such as logic) here. Men are at "irremediable variance one with another." The Illative sense is "a rule to itself" and

cannot be reduced to some other dead treatise or rule or measure between mind and mind.

“The Illative Sense supplies no common measure between mind and mind.”

The Example of Greece and Rome:

As an example inquiry, Newman presents a study of pre-historic Greece and Rome where he asks, “**What are the marks of truth?**”

He presents the case of several experts on the period and asks why it is that they disagree, asserting that it is a result of their own personal judgments which arise from their particular state of thought which is too subtle to be scientific. Each expert operates by his own criteria of judging, which criteria vary from expert to expert “**and these admit of no common measure**” (recall that while we began our quest with a desire “to find a common measure between mind and mind” from which to build our assent, we have repeatedly met with failure to find such a measure).

Newman quotes some of these experts who have commented on the situation:

“Ingenuity and labour can produce nothing but hypotheses and conjectures, which may be supported by analogies, but can never rest upon the solid foundation of proof.”

...

“Our means of knowledge are so limited, that no one can produce arguments sufficiently cogent to contend against opposing preconceptions, and it creates a painful sensation of diffidence, when we read the expressions of equal and absolute persuasion with which the two opposite conclusions have both been advanced.”

Newman notes that the experts begin to attack one another and concludes that “**men become personal when logic fails;**

“it is their mode of appealing to their own primary elements of thought, and their own Illative sense, against the principles and the judgment of another.”

In a passage which seems to describe this Illative sense, Newman quotes Reinhold Niebuhr:

“The real geographer has a tact which determines his judgment and choice among different statements. He is able from isolated statements to draw inferences respecting things that are unknown, which are closely approximate to results obtained from observation of facts, and may supply their place. He is able with limited data to form an image of things which no eyewitness has described.”

Newman says this is the same principle he is putting forth himself (the Illative sense), which others (some critically) have called a “second sight” and “to divine” facts.

Aspects of the Case

Newman lists examples of puzzling cases in various subject matters (history, philosophy, science) in

which a certain genius is able “**to detect the principle which rightly interprets the riddle**” (I think of Einstein here, bringing a novel “aspect” to the case which solved a particularly challenging riddle of time and space).

Newman says that it is the particularly novel “aspect” that originates from the individual talents of the genius which affords a new solution to these difficult cases. But these talents are too subtle and personal to be made general by human teaching in such a way as to be universally shared.

“There is something deeper in our differences than the accident of external circumstances; and we need the interposition of a Power greater than human teaching and human argument to make our beliefs true and our minds one.”

The Conflicts of First Principles

- 1) The right of making assumptions. Newman notes that the doctrine of doubt defeats itself if the doctrine is applied to itself.
- 2) That true revelations should be explicit. Newman blames the 16th and 17th centuries for obfuscating the explicit truths of Christianity
- 3) Whether governments should be of a religious character and what is social justice.
- 4) The question of the “**Rule of Faith.**”

Newman spends some time on this last question, which he presents as an assertion (and assumption) made by Protestant that the Rule of Faith is derived solely from scripture.

Here, Newman lays “**the ways in which truth is struck out in the course of life:**”

“Common sense, chance, moral perception, genius, the great discoverers of principles do not reason. They have no arguments, no grounds, they see the truth, but they do not know how they see it; and if at any time they attempt to prove it, it is as much a matter of experiment with them, as if they had to find a road to a distant mountain, which they see with the eye; and they get entangled, embarrassed, and perchance overthrown in the superfluous endeavor. It is the second-rate men, though most useful in their place, who prove, reconcile, finish, and explain.”

Newman shares the above passage as an articulation and description of the Illative Sense, yet he points out that he originally applied this statement as a defense of the Protestant position on the Rule of Faith and that in so doing he applied the Illative Sense to mistaken elements of thought: the assumption that “Scripture is the Rule of Faith,” which he neglected to examine due to the tenor of the times in which this assumption “so deeply sunk.”

After the Aspects of the Case: Antecedent Reasoning

“After the aspects in which a question is to be viewed, and the principles on which it is to be considered, come the arguments by which it is decided; among these are antecedent reasons, which are especially in point here, because they are in great measure made by ourselves and belong to our personal character.”

Newman gives a couple of examples of antecedent reasonings which form a logical fallacy insofar as

the argument assumes the case in question. (To say that miracles are impossible “*because*” nature is obedient to laws.)