DESTINY, MORALITY AND IDENTITY IN THE THOUGHT OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

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In his voluminous works on theology and the spiritual life, John Henry Cardinal Newman rarely, if ever, discusses moral theory by itself, and he has not generally been studied as a moral philosopher. However, radical changes in recent secular discussions of ethical theory might result in our recognizing his importance in that field, too.

Twentieth-century moral theory has included a long dispute between consequentialists, who think of morality as aimed at maximizing some aim such as happiness, and various kinds of formalists, who concentrate on the character of the moral agent's decisions. A good example of this dispute occurs in discussions by Frankena and Hare. They disagree about the definition of morality, but agree that moral 'action guides' will occur in prescriptions that are universalizable.[1] Frankena, a consequentialist, adds what the formalists omit, that moral rules must express sympathetic regard for the interest of others.

Could we conceive of morality without universalizable rules? This possibility has been presented in some essays which were not widely noticed because they seemed merely to direct attention to exceptional situations in morality. They depict hard cases in which a moral agent might feel torn between acting on principles (of either school) and meeting needs, whether his own or others'. The interesting fact is that the agents in such situations strike us as more conscientious, moral and true-to-life than the rule-keeping models pictured in the two more popular approaches.

Pursuing that thought, Niel Cooper, Alasdair MacIntyre, Peter Strawson, and others sketch cases in which neither consequentialist nor formal rules provide adequate guidance. For example, MacIntyre discusses a convinced pacifist who advocates total pacifism, but only for himself, because he cannot subject others to the hardships involved.[2] (A real-life decision of this sort was made by Vera Brittain in England during World War II). A similar decision, for other motives, is that of Gauguin, abandoning his family to realize himself as an artist.

When judgements such as these are drawn to our attention we realize that our moral life is not fully depicted by traditional ethical theories. In actual moral life one and the same agent will sometimes decide to break moral rules to promote the happiness of others, and at other times ignore the happiness of others for the sake of obeying moral rules. Of such decisions, MacIntyre has written that they must be depicted by devices such as the novel, because 'all that can be done is to exhibit the passage of the moral agent through perplexity.'[3] Cooper wrote that in such cases we often find a conflict between individual moral decisions and socially conditioned rules. 'The two concepts are interlocked.' Thus, says Cooper, although we want the rules and recognize their worth, we also want the individual examples, which can be morally illuminating:

> We should not be made to choose between the two concepts, we should not be presented with a rigid 'either/or'. Whether we speak as conceptual analysts

> or moral agents, when we are asked to choose between the two concepts the right answer and the rational answer to give is the child's answer, 'We want them both.'[4]

Yet this is paradoxical, and much as we may wish to become as little children, we must also give some sort of rational account of such decisions. If we do feel morally obliged to act in alternating moral modes, how do we justify ourselves?

No plausible answer to this question was forthcoming until Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, carried the discussion further by depicting the morality of various ancient and medieval cultures, to illustrate that actual embodiments of virtue are not exclusively consequentialist of formalist. Instead, strong traditional moralities, with effective action guides, are grounded in imaginative depictions of the overall aim of human life. These integrated concepts of fulfilment have been expressed in religious narratives, such as myths, legends and gospels.[5]

Although this could easily raise new problems, since there are various religious narratives, it does help to explain the experience of traditional morality, and why it engages people's imaginations, emotions and wills in any culture. It also depicts systems that permit moral agents a surprising degree of flexibility when, as in the case of Gauguin, they heed a 'call' to do something special.

Gauguin, by the way, does belong among such people. Leaving family and home to pursue his career, he may appear to be simply undertaking the career pattern of a sub-culture of Western European artists. Yet, he exemplifies a narrative archetype that occurs more widely. Abandoning everything and setting out on his quest, he is like a legendary Christian saint leaving home penniless. He is like Siddhartha Gautama leaving his palace and riches to seek salvation.

Thomas Nagel has pointed out the full range of risks in such moral lives. The agent who acts on a vision of his destiny is choosing not only the narrative that will guide him, but the manner in which he will instantiate it, in the details of his life. Given life's uncertainties, he will therefore need a certain amount of what Williams and Nagel call 'moral luck', if he is to be justified. If, for example, Gauguin's decision is good (because he eventually succeeds as an artist), his decision will be made 'good' by succeeding events, not all of which are under his control. He also has to have the good luck, before his judgment, that he has the appropriate talents, that he is educated in certain ways, and that he encounters circumstances that cause him to consider the right course of action.[6]

Yet, such morality does not always seem excessively risky to those who espouse it. Their moral position can be secure, stable and flexible, and commentators such as MacIntyre suggest that they exemplify morality in a form that is both primordial and true. Their position is, in fact, so enviable that some secular scholars have tried to reconstitute it without its religious component. Some, like Bernard Williams, have tried to advocate it as the morality of personal integrity.[7] I would say, however, that a religious or quasi-religious narrative is indispensable, because integrity has a "longitudinal" character. It occurs in moral agents seriously committed to a lifelong development, realizing their destiny, and ready to sacrifice other interests to it.

At least three things can be said about such morality. First, as MacIntyre notes, our post-religious philosophical world has for a long time ignored it. Second, that situation has not prevented people from choosing religious moralities. Third, we cannot deny that their decisions do require vindication by "moral luck" or its equivalent.[8]

In fact, the risk they take is so great that we may expect that such moral agents, whether religious or just traditional, would evolve defensive strategies to minimize it. One such strategy, discussed by Thomas Nagel, is the attempt to detach the 'true' or integral self from the world's events, in the hope that it, at least, can be

good, regardless of the causes and effects of its actions. Yet, this Kantian strategy can easily rob the self of important characteristics. The self that has been defined so as never to be morally sullied, because it is separated from the springs and results of its actions, will be inadequate as a representation of a person. In fact, Nagel speaks of this consequence of the 'purified self' strategy as an insoluble problem.[9] His only suggestion is that if we could depict ourselves as integral agents, and at the same time explain such agency as consistent with our determination by external circumstances, the problem would be solved.[10]

If some kinds of formalism can be interpreted as strategies for avoiding the risk of commitment, so also can some kinds of consequentialism. Their device is a fundamental decision to adopt an unsentimental, minimal moral goal, such as satisfying peoples' desires. Such a goal will be presented as rational and possible, in the hope that it can be commended to 'men of sense everywhere' (in Hume's words). Both Mitchell and MacIntyre write persuasively about the failure of this move in utilitarian and other naturalistic moral philosophies, which fail not because they are unreasonable, but because their minimal ideas of moral aims are, like the formalist 'detached self', devoid of character.[11] In fact, the aridity of such models has had the result, noted by Mary Warnock, that moral philosophers since 1960 have attempted to breathe life into their subject by turning to either political philosophy or moral psychology.[12] MacIntyre's solution to this sorry situation is to argue for a rebirth of Aristotelian natural philosophy, to give us a paradigm of the fulfilled human life. However, this is not likely to be widely accepted in the contemporary intellectual world.

Thus, contemporary ethical theorists who consider this problem find themselves in a dilemma. On the one hand they may project either a detached, emptied self or a skeletal concept of moral fulfilment. On the other, they may enrich morality with a traditional narrative foundation, but at the considerable cost of being unsure of its truth, so that their moral agent is at risk, depending on 'moral luck' for justification of his decisions.

It is these concerns, as well as their secular context, that Newman anticipated. We know that he was very much aware of secular culture, and of the alternatives it offers. *The Idea of a University* shows this in an important way. In it Newman discusses two ways of life for which people in his time could conceivably be educated. (Almost incidentally he mentions a third, which he does not take seriously). These ways of life resemble what Bernard Williams has recently called 'ground projects' (aims in life that can give it overall integrity).[13] The two that Newman considers seriously are the life of the cultivated gentleman, and that of the Christian.[14] Newman rejects a third educational possibility, the training of scientists, because he believes that producing skills and ideas for society, rather than developing persons, is not a suitable activity for a university.[15]

Newman is, of course, an advocate of the Christian ground project in a subtle synthesis with that of the rational and moral gentleman. His own commitment to that ideal is evinced in his letters, diaries, sermons and essays, where we see him immersed in a particular understanding of the nature and destiny of man. When, for example, his sister dies, he never deviates from Christian reactions to the event, in his conversations with his dying sister, and in correspondence with friends afterwards.[16] His character throughout his life, in all aspects, is similarly serious and consistent. His moral integrity resides not just in rule-keeping, but in a consistent development which he sees as his destiny. Dessain alludes to this quality in Newman's character, and Newman, in the *Apologia*, tried to explicate it.[17] Newman himself said that he would judge another person's spiritual state, not by his prayers, opinions, or other words, and not by what he observed about him over a period of a day

or year, but by his consistent life, 'and therefore there are very few people I can be sure of — though I feel it is no business of mine to judge men, but in faith to view them as Christians.'[18]

Such a longitudinally integrated character, though achieved by effort and decision, is also a product of luck or destiny. It 'happens' to the agent as he accomplishes it. Newman's impressive attempt to analyze the process of assenting to beliefs, in his *Grammar of Assent*, depicts this complexity in adopting the Christian ground project. Using a well-known series of distinctions, he identifies the 'real assents' which occur in the concrete experience of individuals. As distinguished from 'notional assents', they embody commitments to beliefs which, in many instances, we would call 'existential'. They may be commonplaces, reported in such propositions as that one is having a particular sensory experience, or that the world external to one's experience exists. They can also concern more transcendent things, such as the reality of oneself or God, but they always involve certitude. With the simple certainties, such as the existence of the self or the external world, this is obvious. He holds that the more complex are also certitudes, because they proceed from acts of the whole self, integrating intellectual, moral, aesthetic, psychological, and other responses, as well as conscious and unconscious presuppositions and tendencies.

All of this seems to represent the beliefs that ground morality as relative to individual characters and circumstances. In fact, Newman supports that interpretation of his theory when he quotes Pascal's argument that we should believe in Christianity because the accomplishments and precepts of Christians are so striking as to require a supernatural explanation. Newman remarks that the force of this argument depends on 'the assumption that the facts of Christianity are beyond human nature', so that, 'according as the powers of nature are placed at a high or low standard, that force will be greater or less; and that standard will vary according to the respective dispositions, opinions, and experiences, of those to whom the argument is addressed.'[19] In an earlier place in his exposition, Newman suggests that such individual characteristics could be compared to accidents:

> That this particular man out of the three millions congregated in the metropolis, was to have the experience of this catastrophe, and to be the select victim to appease that law of averages, no statistical tables could foretell, even though they could determine that it was in the fates that in that week or day some four persons in the length and breadth of London should be run over. And in like manner that this or that person should have the particular experiences necessary for real assent on any point, that the Deist should become a Theist, the Erastian a Catholic, ... are facts, each of which may be the result of a multitude of coincidences in one and the same individual, coincidences which we had no means of determining, and which, therefore, we may call accidents. For —
>
> There's a Divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough hew them how we will.[20]

Thus he emphasizes two clusters of circumstances in the development of belief, namely, personal factors in the nature of the individual, and extra-personal accidents which could be called his destiny. Newman admits that we could doubt the truth of beliefs so acquired, and he mentions many reasons that might be invoked for doing so. He responds to such doubts, as is well known, with his argument that certitudes that are 'indefectible' can be obtained when the process of assent has gone on properly. Less explicit and less well-known, but equally effective, is his argument that the essential self of any individual is 'reserved', and therefore free from the

vicissitudes of doubt. Let us first consider this latter, lesser-known appeal, and then return to the 'indefectibility of certitude.'

The reserved self, in Newman's thought, is the self separated from all the processes, associations, doctrines, and shared beliefs that we experience. It is the self as directly perceived, and for Newman it is the most real thing there is. As Vargish puts it,[21] 'Newman stresses the unreal nature of abstractions throughout his Anglican as well as his Catholic career. Reality, for Newman, is in nature always unique and individual'. However, this does not refer primarily to unique and individual external objects. Newman once wrote to his sister Jemima, 'What a veil and curtain this life is! Beautiful, but still a veil'.[22] In the *Apologia* he refers to an idealistic essay which he wrote as a boy, in 1816-17, to the effect that so-called reality is like a dream, and O'Faolain comments, 'For him the only real personality is the private personality, the anonymous secret, known inadequately even to ourselves.'[23] This belief recurs vividly in a sermon of 1833, entitled 'The Immortality of the Soul',[24] where he argues that each of us begins by supposing himself to be in union with the world, as just another part of it. But he continues, we gradually realize our separate existence, and that we have moral responsibilities. This develops into an awareness of the self as the most certain reality there is. Newman believes, as is well known, that full self-awareness is contiguous with knowledge of God. In addition, he attributes other important features to it.[25]

One of them is growth. Full self-awareness as simultaneously perception of God is not achieved suddenly. Just as doctrine is capable of development, so also is individual self-realization, as one 'advances to the fullness of his original destiny,' discovering 'the law of his being'.[26] However, there is never a final and complete discovery, because each self is a 'mystery',[27] in the ancient sense of a solemn process in which, as one goes further, there are ever-more-profound revelations.[28] In one extraordinary passage, Newman eloquently sketches the unity of microcosmic and macrocosmic events, in individual living things, in societies, and in 'this wonderful web of causes and effects'.[29] He concludes, 'all that is seen — the world, the Bible, the Church, the civil polity, and man himself — are types, and, in their degree and place, representatives and organs of an unseen world, truer and higher than themselves.'[30]

Yet we discover that Newman does not take doctrines about that unseen world too seriously. As he sees it, the true and serious realities are concrete, private, often inarticulate individual experiences. Thus, for example, his discussion of transubstantiation appears almost casual because, while not doubting the real presence, he does not believe that a particular verbal form is essential to explain it.[31] He has similar thoughts about the resurrection of the body. He believes in it, but freely speculates about the way in which it might happen.[32] O'Faolain says that Newman's discussion of creeds, in *The Arians*, reveals his belief that they are all (in effect) relatively inaccurate. They arise as regrettable necessities, when disputes within the Church must be settled.

> Inevitably, all his approaches to these early controversies are coloured by a sad regret for still earlier centuries when felt traditions took the place of spoken creeds, and the acceptance of things ineffable was as simple as the child's unenquiring trust.[33]

Thus, self-realization is complex, so that commentators regularly remark that Newman's thought has two foundations, the certainty of the unique, private self, and the certainty of God. Linking these two puts us in mind of conscience, in which self and God are related. Newman defines conscience in psychological terms as,

'a certain keen sensibility, pleasant or painful, ... attendant on certain of our actions, which in consequence we call right or wrong."[34] Referring to externals, he speaks of "things which excite our approbation or blame, and which we in consequence call right or wrong."[35] Conscience discerns right and wrong in its judgemental character, and sanctions right actions in its magisterial character. It is reasonable, but it is also moral and spiritual. It is a response to something that strikes us as personal, which we encounter in our total experience. In "this special feeling" there are "the materials for the real apprehension of a Divine Sovereign or Judge."[36]

Newman expands upon this personal feature of conscience at some length in the *Grammar*. He describes conscience as 'always emotional', and says that it 'always involves the recognition of a living object towards which it is directed ... If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at trangressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible.'[37] Thus, he argues that conscience teaches us that God is, that He has certain characteristics, and that a certain form of life, spiritual as well as moral, is required of us.

Conscience, then, has a wider scope than has been supposed. It is the name of the most certain consciousness of reality, conveying direct awareness of the self and God in relationship. It therefore dictates our form of life and its aims in all details. In 1875, discussing the authority of the Queen and the Pope, Newman wrote (as if to present-day consequentialists and formalists) that, 'there is no rule in this world without exceptions, ... so I give absolute obedience to neither.'[38] He said quite explicitly that we would be mistaken if we supposed that rules and systems protect us from being "thrown upon what is called by divines, 'the Providence of God.'" Infallible authority can never shelter us from life's problems or from 'God's particular call.'[39]

But this again raises the question of certitude. How can a person be sure his conscience and the real assents that ground it are without error? Although the basic features of Newman's theory are well known, we can profit from a contemporary expression of it by M J Ferreira. He agrees that 'certitudes' fall within the class of assents. They are of many kinds, but all of them are assents which can stand up to reflection, which is the achievement of a decision by the intellect in combination with the conscience, the will, and other reactions of the whole person. That is why Newman characterizes such decisions in a special way, as products of the illative sense. By that term he refers to a process that combines the various functions just mentioned in an appropriate balance, which also has a reflexive character. It can include moral reflection on moral decisions, moral reflections on intellectual decisions, and various other such combinations. The illative sense therefore depicts man, as Newman would say, as ' ... *not* a reasoning animal, he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal.'[40]

The spiritual certainty that such a process provides is not that of logical certainty. It is, rather, that kind explained by such thinkers as John Wisdom and Wittgenstein, who discuss the occurrence of beliefs that cannot be denied, within a given world-view and its linguistic expressions. Such beliefs provide ways of understanding experience systematically, grounding an effective way of life. In founding and organizing a world-view, they are presupposed throughout it, and they are beyond real questioning. Jamie Ferreira explicates this theory, as it occurs in various places in present-day philosophy. From Hacker, *Insight* and *Illusion*, he presents a repetition of Newman's (and others') ideas of how beliefs and certitudes arise. 'We create our forms of representation prompted by our biological and psychological character, prodded by Nature, restrained by society and urged by our drive to master the world.'[41] Ferreira emphasizes that, looking at certainty in this way, Newman and Wittgenstein are writing

about a very widely-played language-game. It belongs to 'nothing less than the entire human community with the constitution given to it by God.'[42]

Now, this may seem rather poetic, but it does enhance our understanding of Newman's concept of 'certitude.' First, as Ferreira points out, Newman admits the fallibility and corrigibility of human beliefs.[43] Yet he also places limits on doubt.

> Both in his early and late writings Newman condemned the idea that we have a 'duty to doubt everything.' We need a reason to doubt; we only doubt *within* a system. Newman thus set forth quite clearly what C S Peirce, Wittgenstein, and others would later maintain — namely, universal doubt is unreasonable, since we need grounds for doubting... Wittgenstein points this out in *On Certainty* — 'What I need to show is that a doubt is not necessary even when it is possible.' (*On Certainty* 392) Is not this what Newman meant by saying that doubt is often 'possible, but it must not be assumed,' since 'to be just able to doubt is no warrant for disbelieving.'[44]

Therefore, Newman's certainty about his ultimate beliefs is, in context, well founded. That is, given his moral luck (or destiny) that he was born and raised in a certain time and place, and that his decisions had the results that they did, he is correct in judging that his fundamental religious beliefs are 'indefectible.' He begins with certainty about himself, which leads to certainty about God, so that we may say that his destiny complements and elaborates his strong sense of identity. Yet, as a man aware of the skeptical currents of his time, he realizes that the belief to which he is destined can be questioned. Therefore, he points out that they are firmly embedded in a system of commonplace certitudes about self-identity, conscience, sensory experiences, and the external world. Admittedly, any one of those beliefs is theoretically open to doubt, but Newman sees them as interlocking building blocks in a practical way of life that embodies moral and spiritual integrity both at given moments and in the long run of life's development. Thus, they are really beyond question.

Newman's moral thought never occurs in separation from his spiritual and theological thought, and the drying-up of twentieth-century analytical ethics has helped us to understand why that is so. In contrast to rival secular moral theories in his own times, in contrast to the skeletal moral selves and moral aims of so much of this century's moral philosophy, Newman's thought contains a rich depiction of human moral life, set in a context of traditional narrative explanations of such puzzling moral experiences as weakness of will, moral responsibility in already-determined situations, good and bad moral luck, and hope of ultimate vindication. Even those who cannot accept such religious beliefs might well profit from studying their role in his moral theory, and the ways in which he justifies them.

END NOTES

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2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *What morality is Not* in Wallace and Walker (eds.), *op. cit.*, p.30

3. *Ibid.*, p.38

4. Neil Cooper *Two Concepts of Morality*, in Wallace and Walker, *op. cit.*, p.90

5. Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue*, Second edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984)

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7. Kenneth F. Rogerson *Williams and Kant on Integrity*, in *Dialogue*, XXII:3 (Sept., 1983), pp.461f

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21. Thomas Vargish, *Newman: The Contemplation of Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p.67

22. Sean O'Faolain *Newman's Way* (Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952), p.141

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24. John Henry Newman *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (Oxford: Rivingtons, 1870), Vol. I, pp.18-20

25. Vargish, *op.cit.*, p.184

26. Robin C. Selby, *The Principle of Reserve in the Writings of John Henry Cardinal Newman* (Oxford University Press, 1975), p.104. (Selby here refers to the *Grammar of Assent*, p.265)

27. Selby, *op. cit.*, p.62

28. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Essays Critical and Historical* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1897), Vol. II, pp.190ff

29. *Ibid.*, p.191

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31. Dessain, *op. cit.*, p. 89. This refers to Newman, *Apologia*, p.185

32. O'Faolain, *op. cit.*, pp.156f

33. *Ibid.*, p.191

34. Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, p.80

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, p.83

38. Lee H. Yearley, *The Ideas of Newman* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), p.73

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40. Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, p.72

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