Newman and the Four Aspects of Conscience*

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ABSTRACT
Newman's writings on conscience bring out four of its important features: first, its imperatival aspect, as a 'commanding dictate' within the human breast; second, its normative character as 'a law, an authoritative voice'; third, its cognitive aspect as a source of instruction; and fourth, its phenomenological aspect, as involving a certain 'peculiarity of feeling'. Despite his interest in this last aspect, Newman never reduces conscience to a mere internal feeling (after the manner of J. S. Mill); his account also contrasts strongly with the sceptical or deflationary view of conscience found in different ways in the work of Nietzsche and Freud. In some ways Newman's approach is closer to that of Kant, as when he talks of conscience as implying a 'judgment' or 'tribunal', though he avoids Kant's contortions about how to derive the authority of conscience from a purely 'internal forum'. Drawing on these various comparisons and contrasts, the paper proceeds to examine one of Newman's most distinctive philosophical contributions, namely his claim that the phenomenon of conscience plays a key role in support of an argument (for Newman, the clinching argument) in favour of theistic belief. It is argued that at the very least Newman presents us with a powerful challenge — the challenge of whether we can in integrity deny the presence within us of a faculty, made up of a potent fusion of cognitive and affective elements, that points us towards something 'exterior to ourselves', before whom our conduct, and indeed our lives as a whole, are subject to authoritative judgement.

1. Introduction: Newman's image today

The figure of Newman that has come down to us seems in many ways to match the typical image of the Victorian clergyman as someone with an intensely solemn attitude to matters of religion. Perhaps the 'image' of a philosopher or theologian should not affect how we evaluate his or her arguments; but in reality the power of academic fashion is greater than many of us would care to admit, and there is a strong tendency in today's highly secularized academic culture to look askance at earlier writers whose philosophical outlook was pervasively conditioned by their religious commitments. For this reason, Newman's arguments concerning the role of conscience have not received the attention in the wider philosophical community that they deserve. Indeed the very concept of conscience is one that tends to receive scant attention in the secularized world of today's 'mainstream' moral philosophy; it can sometimes seem as if it belongs, along with ideas such as those of sin, atonement, confession, and redemption, to a conceptual framework that modern ethics has largely left behind.

Yet while there is no doubt that Newman's moral and philosophical ideas are deeply imbued with his devoutly held religious faith, it would be a serious mistake to conclude that they are devoid of contemporary philosophical interest. This paper will suggest that what Newman has to say about conscience has an enduring interest that transcends his historical context. His role as a Victorian clergyman may well have led him to pay very earnest and solemn attention to the role of conscience in our lives, but what he has to say about the nature and operation of conscience in the human psyche presents a challenge to modern deflationary accounts that try to downplay its moral and spiritual significance. The aspects of conscience

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that Newman highlights deserve serious attention, and, once adverted to, are not easily dismissed or ignored. Moreover, once they *are* attended to, the stage is set for what is perhaps one of Newman's most distinctive and important philosophical contributions, namely his claim that the phenomenon of conscience plays a key role in support of an argument — for Newman, the clinching argument — in favour of theistic belief.

2. Conscience a 'tetragonal' concept

Examining and evaluating Newman's conscience-based argument for theism will be one of our goals in what follows. But it will be useful by way of preamble to start at a more general level with some conceptual analysis. If we look at the usage of the term conscience as it has come down to us, we find that it is what may be called a 'tetragonal' concept: it has four principal aspects or elements which are equally salient, and equally essential, so that any satisfactory account of conscience must take account of each.

First, there is the imperatival or hortatory*,* or what may be called the *gerundive* aspect — the association with something that is 'to be done' or 'to be avoided'. The deliverances of conscience are characteristically expressed in a mode for which in the Latin language there is a special grammatical form, the gerund, as in the proposition '*hoc faciendum est'* — 'this is *to be done'*. To say that my conscience tells me to φ is to say that I am under some kind of requirement to φ; and conversely, to say 'it goes against my conscience to φ' carries the strong implication I am required not to φ.

But what is the nature of such a requirement? Here we come to a second dimension of the deliverances of conscience. When my conscience tells me to do or to avoid some course of action, this is not just a matter of 'any old' peremptory instruction or insistent demand among the many voices clamouring for attention within the human psyche. Rather, the voice of conscience is, or has been considered to be, as Joseph Butler put it in the eighteenth century, a faculty *in kind and in nature supreme over all others*, and which *bears its own authority* of being so'.[1] In short, conscience is a faculty that has or has traditionally been supposed to have, 'normative' force (to use the currently fashionable philosophical term): its demands are, or have traditionally been taken to be, *authoritative*.

Third, there is the c*ognitive* aspect. Someone with a conscience is one who does not just feel some pressure or inclination to φ or to avoid φ-ing; nor is having a conscience merely a matter of taking oneself to be urged to φ, nor even to be authoritatively commanded to φ. Over and above this, having a conscience about φ-ing implies some kind of *perception* or *discernment* relating to the moral status of φ-ing. To have a strong conscience is to have a keen *awareness* of right and wrong, whether in general terms or in a particular instance, and to have a defective conscience is to be lacking in this respect. Thus Thomas Aquinas in his discussions of conscience assigns it, in the words of one commentator, 'principally a cognitive role', arguing that human beings have 'a fundamental grasp of right and wrong'.[2]

Fourth, there is the psychological or, more specifically, *phenomenological* aspect. People speak of the *pangs* of conscience, meaning that certain behaviour has led to a certain

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[1] Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons* [1726], Sermon II, §8. Extracts from Butler's sermons may be found in J. B. Schneewind (ed.), *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and also in D. D. Raphael (ed.), *British Moralists 1650–1800* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969*).*

[2] Tobias Hoffman, 'Conscience and synderesis', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas,* ed. B. Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 255–264. See also Aquinas, *Disputed Questions about Truth* [*Quaestiones disputatae de veritate,* 1256–9], Qu. 16 (English version, Washington DC: Regneri Publishing, 1954). It should be noted that Aquinas uses the term *synderesis* (a corruption of the Greek term for conscience, *syneidesis*) for knowledge of the general principles of right and wrong, while he reserves the Latin term *conscientia* for the application of those principles to a particular case.

kind of emotional discomfort on the part of the agent; and, conversely, a 'quiet conscience' implies a certain sort of calmness and serenity — a feeling of confidence that one's conduct has been such as to stand up to scrutiny and withstand disapproval. Thus David Hume speaks of the rewards of virtue as including 'inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct'.[3]

3. Deflationary accounts of the four elements of conscience

The four elements just sketched evidently do not in themselves constitute a vindication or validation of the idea of conscience. As regards the first of the features listed above, the *gerundive* aspect, it is open to someone to allow that conscience speaks in the imperatival or hortatory mode, but go on to say that the alleged injunctions are spurious or specious. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, argued that the voice of conscience was the mere bleating of a herd morality, and that yielding to it was a sign of weakness. He envisaged instead a 'new philosopher', who would inaugurate a 'revaluation of values', under whose 'new pressure and hammer conscience will be steeled, a heart turned to bronze'.[4]

The supposedly *normative* or *authoritative* status of conscience comes under attack from a different quarter, in the work of Sigmund Freud, who argues that the voice of conscience is the result of a kind of pathology, where the child's 'aggressiveness [towards the controlling parent] is … internalized, and taken over by a portion of the ego, which sets itself over against the rest of the ego as Superego, and which now, in the form of "conscience" is ready to put into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon others'.[5] The details of this analysis depend on Freud's theory of the unconscious, which is, of course, controversial; but the kind of deflationary account of conscience typified by Freud's approach, assigning the promptings of conscience to the untoward effects of childhood conditioning and psychic tension, does clearly open up the possibility that the authoritative status of conscience might be undermined or at the very least questioned.

Our third feature of the concept of conscience, its *cognitive* aspect, is evidently also open to question, depending on one's metaethical stance. Those for example who take a deflationary view of ethical truth, arguing that ethical assertions are mere projections of subjective preferences or inclinations, will automatically deny conscience a cognitive role, since *ex hypothesi* they are going to maintain there is no genuine ethical object or property to be perceived or cognized.[6]

Finally, the *phenomenological* aspect of conscience is also open to a deflationary or reductionist account, signs of which we find for example in John Stuart Mill, who defined 'the essence of conscience' in entirely subjective terms, as 'a *feeling* in our own mind; a pain more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty'. Mill adds various qualifications, for example that the feeling must be 'disinterested', but the main effect of his account is to reduce the deliverances of conscience to nothing more than a set of purely empirical occurrences within the human mind. The feelings in question, Mill observed, are typically 'encrusted over with collateral associations', derived from the 'recollections of childhood'

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[3] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* [1751], ed. T. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Section IX, Part 2.

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond good and evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse,* 1886], transl. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), §202, 203.

[5] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* [*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur,* 1929], Ch. VII, in *The Penguin Freud Library* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), vol. 12, p. 315.

[6] So-called 'error theorists', for example, maintain that the putative properties ascribed by moral judgements do not in fact exist; see Bart Streumer, 'Can We Believe the Error Theory?', *Journal of Philosophy* 110 (2013), pp. 194–212.

and 'all the forms of religious feeling'; and he goes on to claim that this is enough to explain away the 'sort of mystical character' which is 'apt to be attributed to the idea of moral obligation.'[7] Feelings of conscience, in short, are just that — just feelings; and what one might call the phenomenological 'colour' of the feeling (the painfulness of a troubled conscience) is not for Mill inherently significant or indicative of anything beyond itself (though this does not prevent his assigning it an instrumental value, in so far as it can function as a kind of causal stimulus, an instrumental goad or prod put to the service of the principle of utility).

From this brief overview of the kinds of challenges that are in the offing for each of the four aspects of conscience we have identified, it may be seen that there are considerable obstacles to the validation of conscience as a legitimate and authentic human faculty, entitled to its status as an authoritative guide in human life. With this in mind, let us turn to Newman's own reflections on conscience with a view to seeing both how he handles the four dimensions of conscience so far discussed, and, as a result, how far he succeeds in his goal of validating the credentials of conscience as a faculty that points us to God — a faculty, as he puts it, '[whose] very existence carries our minds to a Being exterior to ourselves … to a Being superior to ourselves … [whose] very existence throws us out of ourselves, beyond ourselves, to go and seek for Him in the height & depth whose Voice it is.'[8]

4. The interwoven strands of Newman's account of conscience

In his discussions of conscience Newman promptly and readily acknowledges the first two of our four elements of the concept of conscience noted above, namely its imperatival and its authoritative aspects. In his *Philosophical Notebook* he characterises conscience as a certain '*commanding dictate*' that man has 'within his breast', and immediately goes on to say that it is not a mere internal impression, but 'a law, an *authoritative voice'*.[9] Our third aspect of conscience, namely the cognitive dimension, is also immediately adverted to by Newman when he speaks of conscience as *instructing* us and implying the idea of a *teacher.*[10] And our fourth dimension, the phenomenological aspect of conscience, is strongly underlined when Newman speaks of the '*peculiarity of feeling'* that is involved.

This fourth aspect has been singled out by some commentators as having pride of place in Newman's account. Thus, Edward Sillem, editor of Newman's *Philosophical Notebook*, observes that Newman's approach to conscience is 'phenomenological, not metaphysical in character'.[11] Certainly Newman's reference to the 'strange, troublesome peremptoriness'[12] of the voice of conscience might give the impression that it is the qualitative psychological character of conscience that is Newman's particular concern — the particular subjective *quale*, as it were (in something like Thomas Nagel's sense of 'what it is like' for the experiencing subject).[13]

It is important, however, to take note of Newman's own explication of what he means by 'this peculiarity of feeling'. The relevant passage is worth quoting at length:

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[7] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* [1861], ed. M. Warnock (Glasgow: Fontana, 1962), Ch. 3, p. 281, emphasis supplied.

[8] John Henry Newman, *The Philosophical Notebook* [*c.* 1859]*,* ed. E. Sillem, revised A. Boekraad (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1970), Vol. 2, p. 53. (All subsequent page references are to Vol. 2 of this edition, which contains the text of the *Notebook.*)

[9] Newman, *Philosophical Notebook,* p. 51.

[10] Newman, *Philosophical Notebook,* p. 53.

[11] Newman, *Philosophical Notebook,* editor's footnote 2 at p. 59.

[12] Newman, *Philosophical Notebook,* p. 53.

[13] See Thomas Nagel, 'What is it like to be a bat?' [1974], in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Ch 12.

> Now I can best explain what I mean by this peculiarity of feeling by contrasting it with the rules of Taste. As we have a notion of right and wrong, so we have of beautiful & ugly; but the latter notion is attended by no *sanction.* No hope or fear, no misgiving of the future, no feeling of being hurt, no tender sorrow, no sunny self-satisfaction, no lightness of heart attends on the acting with beauty or deformity. It is these feelings which carry the mind out of itself & beyond itself, which imply a *tribunal in future*, & reward & punishment, which are so special. The *notion of a future judgement* is thus involved in the feeling of conscience. And more than that — the feeling is one analogous or similar to that which we feel in human matters towards a person whom we have offended; there is a tenderness almost tearful on going wrong, and a grateful cheerfulness when we go right, which is just what we feel in pleasing or displeasing a father or revered superior. So that contemplating and revolving on this feeling the mind will reasonably conclude that it is an unseen father who is the object of the feeling.[14]

The *sanction* referred to here calls to mind J.S. Mill's discussion (written about the same time as Newman's remarks) of the 'sanctions 'of the principle of utility. Painful feelings linked to the violation of duty function as what Mill terms 'internal sanctions', and he wished to enlist these in the service of his own utilitarian ethics. But sanctions, as understood by Mill, are no more than causal motivators — means whereby a desired code may be inculcated into the population so as to reinforce allegiance; we are thus in the territory of inducements for compliance, not in the territory of authoritative reasons for action. Reducing conscience to an internal feeling has obvious costs, as indeed Mill acknowledges when he himself raises the problem that if what restrains me from wrongdoing is 'only a feeling in my own mind', one may be tempted to think that 'when the feeling ceases, the obligation ceases.'[15]

If Newman's account of conscience were to rely on its internal phenomenology alone, it would be liable to this kind of objection. And there is, to be sure, much in Newman's phrasing in this text that has a subjective or phenomenological ring: *feeling* of being hurt; *tender* sorrow; *sunny* self satisfaction. But even a cursory reading is enough to show that Newman's remarks cannot be said to be confined to the domain of subjective phenomenology, since he speaks of the feeling as implying a future *tribunal*, and resulting in *reward or punishment*. This links conscience strongly to ideas of moral judgement and retribution. When we reflect on our conduct, we may, to be sure, feel calmly confident, or instead anxious and apprehensive; but those feelings are directly connected with our perception of our conduct as meritorious or the reverse. We have now gone way beyond phenomenology, since it is apparent that Newman is directly invoking belief in a retributive moral framework.

So despite his talk of 'peculiar' feelings and sensations, Newman unmistakably regards conscience as an inherently cognitive faculty. The sensation of conscience, as he puts it, is 'the *recognition* of our obligation involving an external Being.'[16] Unpicking the strands

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[14] Newman, *Philosophical Notebook,* pp. 59–60. The word 'sanction' is emphasised in the original; other emphases added.

[15] J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Warnock, Ch. 3, p. 282.

[16] '[T]his sensation of conscience is the recognition of our obligation involving the notion of an external being, obliging … not from any abstract argument from the force of the terms (e.g. as a Law implies a Lawgiver), but the peculiarity of that feeling to which I give the name of Conscience.' *Philosophical Notebook*, p. 59. Newman's way of expressing himself here seems less than perspicuous: *recognition* of obligation is an explicitly cognitive notion; but when he says the obligation arises 'from … the peculiarity of that feeling to which I give the name of Conscience', he seems to be crossing categories. The obligation, surely, does not *arise* from the feeling. At best, the

in Newman's account thus in the end takes us some considerable distance from the kind of purely empirical or psychological framework espoused by Mill, and brings us in many respects closer to the quasi-legal or 'forensic' approach of Immanuel Kant. In his *Tugendlehre* or *Doctrine of Virtue* (composed about half a century before Newman was writing), Kant defined conscience (*Gewissen*) as the 'consciousness of an *internal court* in man, before which his thoughts accuse or excuse one another'. Every human being, Kant goes on to argue, is 'kept in awe an by internal judge', and 'this authority watching over the law in him is not something that he himself voluntarily makes, but something incorporated in his being'.[17]

The strongly 'normative' or authoritative conception of conscience that we find in Kant (and earlier in Butler),[18] and which is advanced with renewed force in Newman, corresponds to an idea of conscience that arguably has less purchase in today's increasingly secularized culture than it once did. The key philosophical issue it raises, to which we will now turn, is the question of what might be the source of such an authoritative faculty.

5. The authority of conscience — Newman's Augustinian-Cartesian journey

Newman's conception of the authority of conscience is, as just noted, closer to Kant's than to Mill's, but there are important points of difference. Kant's solution to the problem of the authority of conscience is too complex to unfold in detail here, but in essence it depends on his notion, found in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, of the rational will as 'self-legislating' or 'giving the law to itself' (*selbstgesetzgebend*).[19] In the *Tugendlehre* ('Doctrine of Virtue') Kant explicitly links this conception to the idea of conscience. Within the 'internal forum' of each of us, my acts are brought before the tribunal of reason. But Kant goes on to argue that it is absurd to think of a human being who is accused as one and the same person as the judge; and hence the subject must think of himself as being judged by another, who is 'an ideal person that reason creates for itself'. This looks like an internal analogue of the religious idea of a supreme authoritative judge; but on the question of whether it has any real external counterpart, Kant explicitly draws back from saying that a human being is 'entitled, through the idea to which his conscience unavoidably guides him, to assume that such a supreme being actually exists.' The idea of a supreme 'scrutinizer of all hearts', Kant insists, is given 'not objectively, but only subjectively.'[20] At this point, however, the sceptical reader of Kant may be inclined to question how much the argument has achieved. For once the actual existence of a supreme external authority is put to one side, it may appear unclear how our rational will or rational choice, taken on its own, can be

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feeling (for example a sense of guiltiness) may be said to be a kind of signal that indicates an obligation may have been violated. That the *feeling* is neither necessary nor sufficient for the consciousness of wrongdoing is clear from the fact that one may feel guilty irrationally, when one has done nothing wrong (as some people will, to their great annoyance, find themselves blushing or trembling when they go through customs even though they are completely innocent of smuggling); and conversely, one may be conscious of wrongdoing , yet lack any guilty discomfort (for example because one has taken a tranquilizer).

[17] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals: Doctrine of Virtue* [*Metaphysik der Sitten: Tugendlehre,* 1797], ed. M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ch. 2, §13; in AK 6:438. 'AK' refers by volume and page number to the standard Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften edition of *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Reimer/De Gruyter, 1900–).

[18] See footnote 1, above.

[19] Immanuel Kant *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals* [*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten,* 1785], transl. and ed. T. E. Hill and A. Zwieg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Ch. 2, p. 232; in AK 4:431.

[20] Kant, *Metaphysic of Morals: Doctrine of Virtue*, Ch. 2, §13; AK 6:439.

enough to supply the requisite authority.[21]

Newman, though clearly less philosophically sophisticated than Kant, arguably has the advantage of being able to avoid these Kantian contortions over how to derive moral authority from a purely 'internal forum', deploying instead (in the *Grammar of Assent*) a much more direct and straightforward argument, that the 'special feeling of Conscience which follows on the commission of what we call right or wrong' provides 'the materials for the real apprehension of a Divine Sovereign and Judge'.[22] So although Newman, like Kant, underlines the 'internal' nature of conscience, he insists that by its very nature it points *beyond* the internal forum:

> [C]onscience immediately directs [a man's] thoughts to some Being exterior to himself, who gave it, and who evidently is superior to him … Thus a man is at once thrown out of himself, by the very Voice which speaks within him; and while he rules his heart and conduct by his inward sense of right and wrong, not by the maxims of the external world, still that inward sense does not allow him to rest in itself, but sends him forth again from home to seek abroad for Him who has put His Word in him.[23]

Newman's strategy here strongly calls to mind elements of the thought of St Augustine. The famous Augustinian route to God is primarily an internal one. 'Go not outside but descend into yourself', says Augustine; '*in interiore homine habitat veritas* — the truth dwells in the inner human being.'[24] Newman strikingly follows this route, even explicitly remarking that the outward evidence for God in the external world is inferior to the kind of evidence that can be obtained from within oneself — so much so, he declares, that 'Were it not for this voice, speaking so clearly in my conscience and my heart, I should be an atheist, or a pantheist, or a polytheist when I looked into the world.'[25] Newman's strategy is also strongly Cartesian in character (and Descartes himself was, to be sure, strongly influenced by Augustine).[26] Just as Descartes reasons to the existence of God from the idea of God he finds within himself ('like the mark of the craftsman stamped on this work'),[27] so Newman takes the inner voice of conscience as a clear signal that points *beyond itself* to its divine author:

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[21] For an attempted defence of Kant on this issue, see Christine Korsgaard *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See further John Cottingham, 'Conscience, Guilt, and Shame', in R. Crisp (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 729–43.

[22] John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent* (London: Burns, Oates & Co, 1870), Ch. 5, §1, p. 82.

[23] From the sermon 'Faith Without Sight' of 21 December 1843, in John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), p. 237; cited in Frederick D. Aquino 'An Educated Conscience', *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (2016) 49:2, pp. 63–80, at p. 65.

[24] Augustine of Hippo, *De vera religione* [389–391], 39.72. An English version is available in E. Hill (ed.), *The Works of Saint Augustine* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2005), pp. 29–104.

[25] John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* [1864] (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1890), Ch. 5, p. 241. I am grateful to David McPherson for drawing my attention to this passage.

[26] See Stephen Menn's brilliant study *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[27] *tanquam nota artificis operi suo impressa*; René Descartes, *Meditations* [*Meditationes de prima philosophia,* 1641], Third Meditation, penultimate paragraph; in J. Cottingham (ed. and transl.), *René Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy: A Latin-English edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 72–3.

> [F]rom the nature of the case, the very existence [of this commanding voice within us] carries on our minds to a Being exterior to ourselves; for else whence did it come? and to a Being superior to ourselves; else whence its strange, troublesome peremptoriness?[28]

Newman's thought about something within the mind that 'carries' it towards a being exterior to ourselves exactly parallels the scenario in the Third Meditation, where Descartes's meditator reflects on the ideas he finds within him, and encounters one such idea, that of an infinite and perfect being, which signals, by the very content of the idea, that what is encountered is something wholly beyond the resources of his own mind to have constructed. The idea *within* his mind points *beyond* his own mind to something infinitely greater, something which, as a finite and imperfect being, he immediately recognizes as wholly other.[29] In closely analogous fashion, Newman argues that the commanding voice of conscience 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 cannot emancipate himself from it. He can disobey it, he may refuse to use it; but it remains.[30]

The movement of thought here is characteristically Cartesian — a movement from something whose very existence within the mind points towards something outside it — something which is 'exterior to ourselves' and 'superior to ourselves'. Descartes's reasoning in the Third Meditation cannot be evaluated here, but in essence it depends on the claim that the meditator's mind cannot have constructed the idea of infinite perfection from its own finite and imperfect resources. But what are we to make of the corresponding argument in Newman? It seems that Newman relies on an analogous claim to that of Descartes — that the authoritative, commanding voice within me cannot have come from me alone, so must have come from outside, from a divine source; 'for else', as Newman puts it, 'whence did it come?'

6. Newman's challenge

To the question 'else whence did it come?' Freud and his followers, as we noted earlier,[31] might well reply 'from the voice of the controlling parent!'. Newman is of course blissfully unaware of the possibility of this kind of psychoanalytic deflation of the authority of the voice of conscience, and today's reader cannot perhaps help seeing a certain innocence and naivety in the way he unhesitatingly relies on the childlike awe he feels towards the heavenly father 'to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear.' He continues, in a way which might almost seem designed to set up his argument for a scathing Freudian critique:

> If, on doing wrong, we feel the same tearful, broken-hearted sorrow which overwhelms us on hurting a mother; if, on doing right, we enjoy the same sunny serenity of mind, the

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[28] John Henry Newman, *Sermons Preached on Various Occasions* [1856–57] (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1908), Sermon 5, 'Dispositions for Faith', p. 65 (available online at *https://www.newmanreader.org/works/occasions/sermon5.html*).

[29] We cannot, says Descartes in the original Latin, *grasp* or comprehend (*comprehendere*) this infinite perfection, but we can somehow reach out to it, or '*in a certain manner attain to it*' (*quocunque modo attingere*).[29] Descartes, *Meditations*, ed. Cottingham, pp. 72–3. See further J. Cottingham, 'From desire to encounter: the human quest for the infinite', *Religious Studies* (2019) 55, pp. 375–388.

[30] Newman, 'Dispositions for Faith', p.. 64–5.

[31] See section 3, above.

> same soothing, satisfactory delight which follows on our receiving praise from a father, we certainly have within us the image of some person, to whom our love and veneration look, in whose smile we find our happiness, for whom we yearn, towards whom we direct our pleadings, in whose anger we are troubled and waste away.[32]

The kinds of feelings Newman describes, of yearning, of dependency, of desire to please, seem all too apt to be traceable, Freudian-style, to the early experience of the helpless infant. Yet on reflection it seems clear that there are severe limits to how far the Freudian critique can be pressed. Simply to say that the relevant feelings were implanted in us as children by our parents is only a very short-term explanation, since the question immediately arises as to how the relevant feelings were transmitted to them, when *they* were children. In fairness to Freud, he himself was quick to grasp this point:

> parents and authorities follow the precepts of their own super-egos in educating children … Thus a child's super-ego is in fact constructed on the model not of its parents' [ego], but of its parents' superego [and thus] it becomes the vehicle for … the judgements of value which have propagated themselves from generation to generation.[33]

The upshot is that Newman's question about conscience — 'else whence did it come?'— remains a challenging one, and is not easily turned aside by referring to parental inculcation, since this does not explain away but only postpones the question of the ultimate source of the feelings in question. There is a further parallel here between Newman's argument and the Cartesian argument from the presence of the idea of God within my mind: explaining away conscience in terms of a parental voice is, in itself, no more satisfying than (as many of Descartes's critics have tried to do) explaining away the idea of God by saying that I received it from my parents or teachers. For such a move simply postpones the question of its ultimate genesis.

The other crucial point to note here is that Newman's argument, as we have already had occasion to observe,[34] does not rely on phenomenology alone. Yes, Newman does spend considerable time reminding us of the powerful feelings attending on the urgings of conscience, but there is always a link, implicit or explicit, with the cognitive element — a moral judgement of rightness or wrongness. The emotions associated with conscience, whether the painful emotions of 'confusion, foreboding, self-condemnation', or the reassuring feelings of 'deep peace, security and hope', all, Newman argues, 'impress the imagination with the picture of a Supreme Governor, a Judge, holy, just, powerful, all-seeing, retributive…'[35] So the feelings in question stimulate the imagination, but the role of the imagination here should not be contrasted with that of rational inference,[36] but serves instead

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[32] Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, p. 109.
[33] Sigmund Freud, *New Lectures on Psychoanalysis* [*Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse,* 1933], in S. Freud, *The Essentials of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Anna Freud, (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 493. (These lectures are also available in *The Penguin Freud Library* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), vol. 2, pp. 88ff.)
[34] See section 4, above.
[35] Newman, *Grammar of Assent,* p. 110.
[36] Notwithstanding the long-standing philosophical prejudice against the imagination, I have argued elsewhere that drawing on the fruits of the imagination can often nourish a richer and fuller kind of philosophical understanding than can be furnished by abstract intellectual analysis alone. See J. Cottingham, *The Humane Perspective: Philosophical Reflections on Human Nature, The Search for Meaning, and the Role of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2024), Ch. 1.

to make vivid the inescapable, and for Newman inescapably personal,[37] nature of the authoritative moral framework by which our lives are to be judged.

So as we come to the end of our discussion of the use to which Newman puts his account of the phenomenon of conscience, we find, I think, an argument of considerable power. It points to there being within us a faculty which has the status of a 'solemn Monitor', as Newman once put it,[38] and which therefore has enormous significance for the truth of the religious outlook. Conscience is a 'monitor' because it speaks in the *gerundive* (imperatival or hortatory) mode, telling us that such and such conduct is to be done or avoided; it speaks with an *authorit*y that we did not and cannot create for ourselves; it generates insistent *feelings* of guilty distress or of calm serenity that are powerful moral indicators; and above all it *alerts* us to an objective standard of justice and rightness before which we find ourselves judged. Newman here emerges as a worthy successor to a long line of religious thinkers, reaching right back to Aquinas,[39] and indeed further back to St Paul,[40] who have insisted, notwithstanding our manifold and palpable moral failings and weaknesses, on a fundamental orientation towards the good in the human spirit, and have seen this orientation as powerful evidence for the truth of the theistic world-picture. The argument is not a coercive one (few if any arguments in philosophy are),[41] for it is open, as many present-day secularist philosophers will insist, to counter-arguments that deny the objectivity of goodness, or deny that such objectivity has a divine source, or attempt alternative explanations for what Newman called the 'troublesome peremptoriness' of the voice of conscience.[42] But at the very least Newman presents us with a powerful challenge — the challenge of whether we can in integrity deny the presence within us of a faculty, made up of a potent fusion of cognitive and affective elements, that holds up our conduct, and indeed our lives as a whole, as subjects for authoritative judgement. For those who find the challenge persuasive, the importance of the phenomenon of conscience can scarcely be exaggerated, and it will not be too much to follow Newman in claiming for it nothing less than the status of being 'the creative principle of religion'.[43]

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[37] There are philosophers — Iris Murdoch is an example — who accept the objective and authoritative nature of the moral framework, but pull back from personalistic theism. According to Murdoch, 'Good represents the reality of which God is the dream;' *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 496. But this position in my view faces serious problems; see J. Cottingham, *In Search of the Soul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), Ch. 3, pp. 88–9.

[38] Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, p. 123. Compare *Philosophical Notebook,* p. 51.

[39] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266–73], IaIae, Qu. 91, art. 2. See also note 2, above.

[40] Romans 2:15.

[41] Compare Robert Nozick's critique of 'coercive' argument in philosophy, in *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), Introduction, pp. 4ff.

[42] See note 28, above.

[43] Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, p. 86.