## KNOWLEDGE AND SCEPTICISM IN NEWMAN AND LOCKE: BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is well known that St John Henry Newman fundamentally opposed John Locke’s ‘love of truth’ thesis. This appears overtly in Newman’s *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*[[1]](#endnote-2), but is foreshadowed in prior writings, notably in such as the *Oxford University Sermons*[[2]](#endnote-3), in *The Idea of a University*[[3]](#endnote-4), and in unpublished philosophical musings collected posthumously as his *Philosophical Notebook* and *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty*[[4]](#endnote-5)*.* Locke’s basic assertions regarding knowledge and its limits (in his *An* *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*[[5]](#endnote-6)) relegated much of what we think we know to opinions backed in some measure by probabilities. Knowledge ‘proper’ is built from degrees down from intuitive[[6]](#endnote-7), to the demonstrative connection of intuitive knowledge, to particular knowledge of what is present to sense. Everything else we assent to is on the basis of its being truth-like in some degree. One of his targets in mooting what has since been called his ‘ethic of belief’ was ‘enthusiasm’, the spurious claim to knowledge especially by those claiming some - especially religious - insight.

Though Newman was no more indulgent of enthusiasm than Locke, he realised that the latter had thrown far too restrictive a cordon around what could count as knowledge. There is much, Newman maintained, that we say we rightly know that escapes Locke’s criteria. We say we know we had parents, shall die, that Britain is an island, and a vast deal more that is not merely probable. Newman’s own thesis allowed the intellectual appropriation of strict demonstrations for their persuasive force. What it questioned was the retrofitting of strict demonstration as necessarily foundational to other things we think certain[[7]](#endnote-8), as this would set up a harmful circle of regress (the more ‘concrete’ certainties judged by the more abstract, whose provenance and ultimate reliability are contingent on the reliability of the concrete, and so on). Though a demonstration has the air of indefeasible certainty, every certainty recognised has its ancestry in certitude, the personal reflection on and confirmation of one’s assent in such and such a matter.

The focus of this paper, however, is not on the differences between Newman and Locke as they show on the doctrinal surface. Instead this paper seeks to explore religious, philosophical and cultural horizons against which the foreground of these doctrinal differences shaped themselves.

## II. LOCKE’S STATUS

Beneath the doctrinal surface shows a good deal of what was felt to be at stake at the time of the unfolding of the arguments. Newman maintained that Locke had a certain place in Protestant self-understanding. In opposing Locke, Newman risked drawing down on himself fire from the many for whom Locke represented a sound standard in reason and religion. Locke was a revered name in a Protestant *mythos*:

a Tradition [including] Locke and the philosophers, Addison and the essayists, Hume, Robertson, and the historians, [which] all proceed upon the hypothesis, which they think too self-evident for proof, that Protestantism is synonymous with good sense, and Catholicism with weakness of mind, fanaticism, or some unaccountable persuasion or fancy.[[8]](#endnote-9)

Walter Mayers, Newman’s boyhood tutor, had commended a book to Newman for its being comparable to the ‘days of Locke for sound conclusive reasoning’[[9]](#endnote-10). Some seventy years on, A M Fairbairn[[10]](#endnote-11) attacked Newman for his *Grammar of Assent*, citing among other things ‘his criticism of Locke’[[11]](#endnote-12) as one of the traits of a sceptical work.

Though he respected Locke, Newman found himself at odds with him on a number of fronts. He associated Locke with the utilitarian in education[[12]](#endnote-13) and the latitudinarian in theology[[13]](#endnote-14). ‘Locke’ Newman wrote, ‘is scarcely an honour to us in the standard of truth, grave and manly as he is’ (*Idea,* p. 319). And so, while it was clear that Newman took no pleasure in opposing Locke, he worried about something in Locke’s thinking that generally passed beneath common notice. And this was to do with Locke’s *reason*.

## III. LOCKE’S REASON

It was within religious disputation that debates about reason sourced their virility. From Richard Hooker[[14]](#endnote-15) onwards, there had been in the English Reformation a great interrogation of reason in its relation to faith. Locke’s ideas spoke to his day because they presented in reasonable dress. He seemed to have brought into taming confluence choppy currents of discourse that rose in the Reformation. Various controversies, for example, questions of faith, reason and authority in religion, found a certain settlement in Locke. Locke also negotiated a truce with radical scepticism. Under the press of its claim, he signed off a great part of the epistemic territory to probabilism. In all this, Locke was religiously and philosophically the child of Latitudinarianism. Among his great mentors were John Tillotson[[15]](#endnote-16) and William Chillingworth[[16]](#endnote-17). And where Tillotson looked to Chillingworth, both looked back to the fertile writings of Richard Hooker.

Sacrificing nuance, three accommodations between faith and reason stand out in the English Reformation: i) reason as handmaiden to faith, ii) reason as redundant in faith, iii) reason as arbiter of faith. The first, resonant with Thomism, survived through Hooker to the Oxford Movement. The second, reminiscent of illuminationist epistemology of a former day, marched with Puritanism. The third was the Latitudinarian settlement in which Locke is situated. This third way has the newness of a post-sceptic rationale, in which the principle of scepticism is accommodated, if mitigated, by imposing strict limits on knowledge. Setting aside ii), accounts i) and iii) are of interest for their purporting to draw on Hooker’s irenic, positive theology of Anglicanism. So what was the gist of Hooker’s account of faith and reason – and what was suspicious for Newman in the Latitudinarian reading of it?

To Hooker is often ascribed the ‘triple-source theory of religious authority: Scripture, reason, and tradition, in that order’[[17]](#endnote-18). Hooker himself maintained the Thomistic distinction between ‘certainty of adherence’ and ‘certainty of evidence’, corresponding to divine faith and human/acquisite faith respectively. Grace was key in the coming to divine faith. For Hooker, no prompt of ordinary reason will supply ‘the enlightening of our minds’ without the concurrence of ‘the special grace of the Holy Spirit’[[18]](#endnote-19). For Laud after him, the grace-prompted will ‘inclines the understanding to yield full approbation to that whereof it sees not full proof’[[19]](#endnote-20). In this, reason was more holistic than the dry scrutiny of *nous*-starved evidentialism. Its locus was ever in the surpassing personal desire for that which the world cannot fulfil. Reason was as an affective searching beyond earthly horizons – in 17th Century parlance, a ‘looking wishly’ (that is, in earnest). The natural desire for beatitude ‘cannot utterly be frustrate’ (Hooker, *Of the Laws,* p. 172).

However, there was a certain unclarity in Hooker’s account of reason that allowed it to be received in different ways[[20]](#endnote-21). Some of Newman’s day thought there was something proto-Lockean[[21]](#endnote-22) in it. Newman himself resolved this ambiguity in Hooker by considering his school to be ‘more orthodox in their conclusions than in their premisses; to be sceptics in their paper theories, and believers in their own persons’ (*GA,* pp.493-4). There is the suggestion of two ‘epistemologies’ at work in Hooker, an empirical epistemology and a mystic epistemology – ‘one underlying his treatment of signs, language, and history, the other, his spiritual and sacramental psychology’[[22]](#endnote-23). When Chillingworth and the circle at Great Tew looked to Hooker to help set the programme for their own *Via Media* between the strictures of Puritan dogma and Laudian liturgical imposition, it was the empirical reading that won out. It prompted the demand that traditional religious authority submit to the tribunal of a reflective, reasoning Christian. Chillingworth’s ‘the Bible, the whole Bible, *and nothing but the Bible*, is the religion of Protestants’ looks like fideism, but is instead the upshot of the only faculty a person has in these matters: probabilistic reason[[23]](#endnote-24). Surveying the doctrinally distinct parties in Reformation Christianity, Chillingworth took their common appeal to the Bible as a strong indicator of its centrality.

Chillingworth’s probabilism was in good part the product of his youthful absorption in Pyrrhonian scepticism and his circuitous confessional journeying. This sponsored in him a mitigated scepticism in which one must drop the pretension of reason to dogmatize about truth and instead let it be modest in its aims and allowed latitude in its claims. From this proceeded a sense that divergences necessarily attendant upon an individual reason’s engagement with scripture need not disturb a Christian unity founded on essentials and tolerant of doctrinal difference in secondary matters. For Chillingworth, in exercise of religion as in exercise of the law, we have seldom more than moral certainty, a certainty not too impaired by being less than mathematical. Regarding argument in religious matters, the noetic in reason must presumably retreat as the inferential advances. Chillingworth’s disputatious reason appears as a stripped-down, confessionally neutral instrument. As Griffin observed in his venerable study of Latitudinarianism: ‘[w]hat Chillingworth required … was a “reason” in religion that would operate *ab initio*, one that was thoroughly “objective” and “universal” … more or less what Locke have understood by “reason”, rather than what Hooker would have understood by it’[[24]](#endnote-25). Alongside this went a positive view of human reason, which, for all its fallibility, was God-given and unlikely in its free range to lead us far wrong.

Diverging from this latitudinarian tradition, there was another reading of Hooker’s reason that retained the importance of reason as a ‘communal wisdom, to be associated closely with the tradition of the Church’ (MacCulloch, ‘Richard Hooker’s Reputation’*,* p. 587). In this alternative tradition, it seems there is greater attention to *nous* (or the ‘moral sense’, as Newman sometimes called it) – that is, to sound first principles for the exercise of an individual Christian’s reason. It is from this wellspring that Newman and his friends in the Oxford Movement drank deeply. The deprecation of reason that Fairbairn alleged in Newman was for the latter a necessary caution about over-confidence in the power of individual reasoning without due attention to sources.

In the province of religion, if it [reasoning] be under the happy guidance of the moral sense ... it will arrive at indisputable truth, and then the house is at peace; but if it be in the hands of enemies, who are under the delusion that their arbitrary assumptions are self-evident axioms, the reasoning will start from false premises, and the mind will be in a state of melancholy disorder (*TP* i, p. 142).

Newman’s suspicions about Locke’s *reason* stemmed from its being representative of Latitudinarian epistemology in a finished form. Locke’s account of revelation completed the dismantling work begun in Chillingworth. Revelation itself must finally answer to reason. It is entirely decomposable into rational elements. Mystery is abolished. Reason is arbiter of rather than handmaiden to faith. In Chillingworth’s *Religion of Protestants* ‘adherence of evidence’ is in the ascendant. Latitudinarian theology seems then to have dispensed with ‘adherence of faith’ altogether. There is now no place for proofs imperfect to the logician, but blessed all the same[[25]](#endnote-26). What is left is acquisite faith, now a creature of reason – a reason that is polemic-ready and tradition-lite. Reason ‘right out of the box’. There is inattention to *nous*, to the need to be well-formed in principles. There is neglect of the personal in reasoning and the communal sense of shared wisdom. There is no self-emptying immersion in tradition and testing it by use.

The same medieval bequest, a commitment to the unity of truth, was for the early moderns simply the presumption they ran with. Whilst in contrast for the Oxford Movement it was something rehoused once more in an ecclesiological setting, albeit in ways changed from the medieval setting in which that commitment had first lived. So for the former ‘unity of truth’ was a formless light, an embodied background understanding and for the latter a fundamental stance inherent in the organic, ecclesiological order. There were epistemological consequences flowing from divergent reception of this same medieval legacy. In rough terms, for Locke’s dissenting and increasingly agnostic rationalist heirs the medieval dispensation of secondary causality loses the real sense of being caught up in a greater-than-itself. Diverting their wonder were things such Galileo’s *ciencia nuovo*, the triumph of Baconian cause, Newtonian apprehension of a wondrous regularity in nature, the shining applicability of mathematical paradigms to the world about us. Kant was not alone in his awe at the starry heavens above and the thought that such vastnesses could apparently run on simple mathematical lines. In place of *nous* formed in reverence of tradition, there was the danger of a worldly *nous* – ‘secular Reason, or Reason, as informed by a secular spirit, or starting from secular principles’ (*US,* p. 57, n4). Against this stood Newman and his friends, who held on to the importance of the traditional, communal and personal in being essential to gain and build a wisdom which encompassed and transcended a mere inferential reason.

## IV. LOCKE’S SCEPTICISM

Beneath this, there was intrinsic to Latitudinarian epistemology a sceptical temper. Chillingworth’s ‘theory of progressive levels of assent and certainty … never disputes the standard Pyrrhonian suspicion that epistemological certainty is unattainable’[[26]](#endnote-27). Popkin saw Locke’s theory of knowledge as the culmination of a revived Pyrrhonism and of the semi-scepticism of Latitudinarian theology[[27]](#endnote-28). The Greek scepticism[[28]](#endnote-29) resurgent in the modern era found early use in religious controversy. Pyrrhonism, lately recovered in copies of Sextus Empiricus’ writings, was especially handy as a weapon – a *machine de guerre –* in religious polemics[[29]](#endnote-30) for its power to undermine an opponent’s claims to religious authority and drive religious confession onto a fideistic footing. Later it came to be a force to be reckoned with on its own terms. Given Newman’s nose for principle, it probably did not escape him that scepticism and Lockeanism may differ on the doctrinal surface, but may be animated by the same principle. (In his *Development of Doctrine*[[30]](#endnote-31), he had articulated how a deep animating principle may surface in opposed doctrinal systems – ‘[t]hus both Calvinism and Unitarianism may be called developments, that is, exhibitions, of the principle of Private Judgment, though they have nothing in common, viewed as doctrines’ (*Dev* p. 54).

What principle could animate both radical scepticism and Lockeanism? It is this: both proceed on the expectation that the *what-it-is* of reason must be prior to the concrete act of reasoning. Scepticism draws its power to disturb on this basis. Radical scepticism asserts: ‘You should know what knowing is before you go on about *claiming you know* *stuff*. If you don’t know what knowing is then you know nothing (Academic scepticism) or you must suspend a verdict one way or another (Pyrrhonism)’. Lockeanism answers this challenge not by rejecting the principle, but by offering it in a more ‘plausible’ or ‘liveable-with’ container[[31]](#endnote-32). Like scepticism, it operates on the principle that an account of reason (in this case, Locke’s ‘love of truth’ thesis) is prior to the concrete exercise of the rational mind. This principle is the pre-emption of the *that* of reasoning by the *what* of reason. And Newman’s response in the *Grammar* is to reject the principle and reverse the priority: the *that* of reasoning in the concrete is prior to the *what* of reason given in after-the-fact account. The ‘reason’ that Chillingworth and Locke ran with is a brittle reconstitution from the remains of a holistic reason they think shattered under the interrogation of scepticism.

## V. EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANXIETY

If Hume and his disciples could live without the expectation that our personal certitudes are in some way answerable to a rationale, then they were in a minority. A brief survey of the intellectual scene of the mid-modern era offers a different picture. A certain epistemological anxiety[[32]](#endnote-33) took hold when scepticism had made inroads deep enough to trouble the lettered classes in the thought that their certitudes may after all be groundless. As mentioned above, scepticism was first reprised in its ancient role of being a gadfly on philosophical dogmatism, but this time within a mitigated sceptical outlook designed to wither the ‘other side’s argument’. Because of a profound shift in intellectual imagination, scepticism at some point takes on the shape of something *real* rather than *notional*. It went from being an intellectual plaything to something with which it was dangerous to toy.

It is as if in the self-jettison from the scholastic world and its obsolete certainty, a sense of elated emancipatory flight began to play in the imagination with a sense of bottomless falling. Pyrrhonian scepticism could work like a universal acid through its mitigating containers and seep outward into the general intellectual consciousness in the form of *la crise pyrrhonienne*. Its prevalence as a counter-current to religious and positive philosophy was such that by the mid-17th Century we have something of a ‘boom’[[33]](#endnote-34) in scepticism. In attendance were its natural concomitants, the search for foundations and fideism.

When Newman either dealt with sceptical arguments in the writings of others or parried the attacks of others upon his own writings, it is important to remember how loaded the term ‘scepticism’ could be in an intellectual age teetering between official Christianity and post-Christian rationalism. Arguably, one could still resource a sense of certainty from that bequest of scholasticism to modern philosophy, a sense of the ‘unity of truth’. One could pursue one’s truths backlit by the belief, commitment, or overwhelming sense that ‘it all fits together’. So long as one had somewhere to lodge unimpeachable certainty, one might be safe.

We might suspect a similar psychology at play in early Protestant ease with and even vaunting of ordinary ways[[34]](#endnote-35) of knowing since the certainty of Holy Writ inoculated from epistemological anxiety. One could rub along well enough with a workaday certainty so long as ultimate certainties were still fixed in religious bedrock. As a general rule, it seems that to the extent that strong and visible symbols of the divine – whether Holy Writ, the established Church, the 39 Articles, and so on – could exert a hold on the moral and affective imagination the chance of destructive scepticism could be forestalled. A lettered believer could allow secular and religious truth their different (and perhaps incompatible) dues. One could adopt the ‘happy inconsistency’ (Cf. *GA, p.* 493-4) which Newman alleged of Richard Hooker and his school.

Things could not last like this. Whereas the noisy seminar of scholasticism had gathered however fractiously around the one Gospel, in the Republic of Letters there were now other gospels touting for the modern intellect. We might conjecture that scepticism sapped the kinetic energy of hitherto unquestioned motivating premises. Perhaps, the suspicion could arise, these motivating premises (such as ‘unity of truth’ or *sola scriptura*[[35]](#endnote-36)) drew doxastic force from the fact that they had in the blur of their momentum evaded scrutiny. If we allow some truth to Newman’s claim that ideas are organic, dynamic and multifaceted in their outworking through history and that they endure to the extent that they are founded on real principles, then we could enquire whether these principles were real enough to be able to resist an antagonistic tide. Perhaps they were merely composed out of materials released in the fissile energy of the Reformation. ‘Unity of truth’ is a fine idea on the move, but examined in still life, as a mere abstraction, it struggles to create its own theoretical infrastructure. Its medieval life was in thought going out to the world upon a religious vision. What ‘unity of truth’ could do then as a theory was owing to that it was something else in practice.

Arguably, the *Solas* of Protestant apologetics do to an extent set *unity of truth* in a remodelled religious home. Nonetheless the strength of *sola scriptura* as a rallying banner must eventually leave it exposed to a rationalist dialectic. By contrast, we might suppose the medieval believer’s certainty reposed on the visible Church as a certainty more wound into life than worn on the sleeve. As such, it would have been on the one hand far less serviceable to disputation but on the other hand protected as a valid certainty in the way ‘common knowledge’ was within medieval epistemology[[36]](#endnote-37). We might expect that many a devout medieval believer simply lived certainties they could articulate only with difficulty, if at all. In the modern era, when astronomical discoveries engaged with biblical cosmology and literary criticism with biblical text, questions naturally raised themselves as a potential ‘clash of certainties’ and answers began to take the hermeneutical form. Prompted by the need to keep the two books – of nature and of God’s Word – in harmony, there arose a group of religiously motivated men of science like Robert Boyle who urged each other on in this harmonizing endeavour[[37]](#endnote-38).

Still, the success of efforts like theirs as a stay against scepticism was not permanent. It is hazardous to gesture at any grand narrative of ‘what went on’ between early modern confidence and later modern second-guessing, but Newman gives in microcosm a compelling ‘story of a sceptic’ in which a mind unmoored from old certainties finds itself ‘slowly and calmly … floated upon the open bosom of an ocean without a shore, the dead profound of interminable, hopeless, scepticism, in which nothing is believed, nothing professed, nothing perhaps even guessed at’[[38]](#endnote-39). Whatever might have been at play, we know at any rate that, as the modern era wore on, remedies against scepticism – that is, the personal procurement of some unquestioned foundation to give epistemological anchorage – were harder to come by. We not infrequently see among Newman’s family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances those who find their orthodoxies destroyed, once tested[[39]](#endnote-40).

If you are a sensitive 19th Century intellectual between beliefs and in need of a creed, the ascendancy of Lockean reason is an obstacle. Though Newman’s *University Sermons* were directed mainly against rationalists within Christianity, they also diagnose the difficulty a good-willed mind must have in coming to faith, once that mind is formed in Lockeanism. Newman insisted that faith, like moral sense, is a principle, not a product, of reason. As such it will harmonise with speculative ‘secular’ reason but not answer to it. Faith is neither a creature of secular reason nor will it decompose to its terms. Thus, if you are going to believe something, you cannot create the unquestioned principle, the permanent anchor, the central doxastic pillar out of the materials of ordinary speculative reason. If by accident of upbringing, education or society one were able to have some devout faith, then all well and good – if it endures. If not, Newman puts it thus:

It is the tendency of a thinking age, viewed apart from the influence of religion, to fall into a state of scepticism, as it is the tendency of an ignorant age, apart from these tendencies, to fall into superstition. (*TP* i, p. 8.)

If this is so, scepticism in the age presented as constant intellectual lure. In the creep of epistemological anxiety, the thought of it could be profoundly unsettling to the lettered classes of the 18th and 19th centuries. An emergent scepticism could worm its way so thoroughly into the psyche as to unweave an integrity that was more than merely intellectual. For those not convinced of the positive case for certainty and yet reluctant to slide into scepticism, there was simply the ongoing reaching for epistemological coping mechanisms. Hume frankly acknowledged the notional abyss his thesis opened and dealt with it by getting on with ordinary life. Samuel Johnson appears to have been tortured by epistemological anxiety[[40]](#endnote-41) that arose from a fertile complexity of character:

A large source of Johnson’s vitality as a writer and thinker is the paradoxical coexistence of two things: on the one hand, the impulse toward generalization and positive, weighty assertion - which is so memorably transmitted by Boswell that one rather too readily classifies it as quintessential "Johnsonian" - and on the other hand, a no less fundamental scepticism with regard to all systematic theorizing and to the adequacy of all general formulations.[[41]](#endnote-42)

We can suspect in, for example, Johnson’s attachment to the national Church, a fideistic impulse, a mind ‘throwing itself upon authority’ as a bulwark against scepticism. The very ‘unreason’ of fideism is a reasonable bridge when the rational road offered no ford to foundational truth. Hume and Johnson, though intellectual enemies, seemed to deal in a similar way with a common mental ague. In some sense they had recourse to *action* or *commitment* to cover a felt breach in the epistemological account.

The standard intellectual medicine of the age did not completely avail. Lockean evidentialism, though more congenial to the British philosophical temper than the *a priori* Cartesian rebuff of scepticism, was still a severe treatment. It ‘cured’ the perpetual suspension of judgment with the admission of a near-universal entertainment of doubt. Newman complained of an evidentialist zeal that would strip someone of those certitudes that could not satisfy the demands of ‘paper logic’, and yet that zeal had been abroad for generations. And neither Cartesian *a priori* certainty nor Lockean intuited or demonstrative certainty could quite throw off the temptation of Pyrrhonism, the sense that, after all, we might have to live in perpetual suspension of judgment.

## VI: RELIGIOUS SCEPTICISM

Lockean thought in its turn sponsored a scepticism that was specifically hostile to religion. As the modern era wore on, it appears that the conviction that truth cannot contradict truth lost focus as a vertical dialogue between lower and higher dispensations as it powered more and more the teasing out of wondrous connections in the ‘immanent frame’[[42]](#endnote-43), within nature itself. A mind convicted of the security of the ‘immanent frame’ as ontological and epistemological anchor, could turn broadside against religious belief in general or against those elements (miracles, for example) of it thought most repugnant to reason. By Newman’s time, the challenge had become hydra-headed in that he found himself ranged against agnostic *and* religious rationalism[[43]](#endnote-44). His avowed principle of the ‘submission of the understanding’ (*LD* V, p. 196) as the necessary approach to religion is impossible once ‘religion’ has been subjected to ‘reason’, when the deity is tamed and the sacred sources coerced into rational frames. The protection against epistemological anxiety could only be bought at the price of epistemic self-emptying. One had to sit at the feet of a revered system and ‘prove its reasonableness by making experiment of it’ (ibid.).

Of course, it was easy for Newman’s detractors to style this as a form of intellectual subservience. But Newman’s epistemology is extraordinarily holistic. As noted, the ‘submission of the understanding’ in religion is of a piece with the ‘obeying prior to reason’ in education and, in turn, with ‘resignation to the laws of my nature’ (*GA,* p. 347) in basic thought. The kenotic way in religion, education, and basic thought alone opens to the broad and fertile plane of knowledge. And if one was not prepared to start one’s reasoning from a lowly place then true understanding in faith or reason was lost. So, while Newman saw raw unbelief[[44]](#endnote-45) as an unprecedented challenge to the Catholic mission, it was in some ways preferable to have that challenge out in the open than to have to deal with rationalism as it had seeped into Christian religion: ‘I prefer to live in an age when the fight is in the day, not in the twilight; and think it a gain to be speared by a foe, rather than to be stabbed by a friend’ (*Idea,* p. 382).

Religious rationalism and its kindred scepticism had achieved a creeping ascendancy in the shade of Reformation controversy, when Anglican divines had spent their disputatious energies against Trent and then in defining a positive ecclesiology for the Church of England. That time – golden to the Movement – between Laud and the Non-Jurors had also been one where rationalism (perhaps under deistic or agnostic cloak) had made deep inroads in English intellectual life. Worse still, they had wormed their way into the ecclesial imagination. When towards the dawning of the 18th Century Anglicanism woke up to these, its own intellectual vision was hazed in a world brightening under a younger sun. This threw a different light and cast sharper shadows on Christian texts, arguments, sources, proportions and connections. When of their efforts Newman wrote ‘[t]he Anglican defenders of Christianity have all along been fighting and retreating’ (*LD*, XIX, p. 480), it was a rueful commentary upon a series of failed strategies. I outline three of these strategies.

One strategy was the ‘moral certainty’ approach, a ‘cut-price’ epistemology which had been long in gestation. It pretended to a practical rather than theoretical certainty. Reposing on the certainty of the scriptures, one could construct a bluff working epistemology for day-to-day use, whose certainty was ‘moral certainty’. This appeared to suit the Evangelical temper – as though practical, scripturally based living could stop sceptical doubt seeping in like damp into the footings. However, moral certainty took on an altogether flimsier feel in the waning of religious conviction. This might arguably have provoked a certain reflex reaction about acting devoutly on probability, as we see in Samuel Johnson:

It is an oddity that the eighteenth century’s term for the degree of knowledge just shy of demonstration is “moral certainty,” but it is a significant oddity — making choices with that kind of evidence is for Johnson a moral duty. (Lynch, ‘Samuel Johnson, Unbeliever’, pp. 14-5)

Another strategy was the charge of high-minded Anglican intellectualism upon the battleground marked out by their enemies. Girded in the same ‘reason’ as their opponents, Paley and his philosophical descendants like Richard Whately sought to show by confidence and rigour where right thinking truly led – back to the Christian dispensation. That Newman broke from Whately and received Paley’s Evidences with coolness are well known. Perhaps he sensed that too much had been conceded to the enemy in accepting their premises of debate. Paley, Newman remarked, ‘half gave up the Old Testament’ (*LD* XIX, p. 480).

The third strategy – Butler’s brilliant amalgam of *The Analogy* – earned Newman’s lasting respect if not complete endorsement. Adopting as his central maxim ‘probability is the guide to life’, Butler’s approach married the putative weakness of workaday ‘moral certainty’ – namely that it rested on the probable not the certain – with the logical rigour of the evidentialists. Butler’s central insight is that in concrete matters probability is all we have, and since we do not scruple to act on probability in the great part of lives in which action is demanded and logical demonstration lacking, then we should certainly not create alien difficulties when it comes to acting in matters of belief and morality.

Newman acknowledged his profound debt to Butler[[45]](#endnote-46). Butler’s ‘if you grant this by ordinary way of thinking, then why not that?’ approach also gave him and others in the Movement a favourite rhetorical tack of excluding middle positions in debate. However, in time, Newman felt more and more unease with its foundation in probabilism, an unease that could neither be set aside[[46]](#endnote-47) nor supplanted[[47]](#endnote-48). Newman mentioned Butler’s tendency to ‘fly off to the consideration of what is safer’ and to make faith ‘a mere practical certainty’ (*LD* XIX, p. 480). Perhaps his clearest articulation of the separation from his admired mentor is in the *Grammar*:

… my aim is of a practical character, such as that of Butler in his *Analogy*, with this difference, that he treats of probability, doubt, expedience, and duty, whereas in these pages, without excluding, far from it, the question of duty, I would confine myself to the truth of things, and to the mind’s certitude of that truth. (*GA,* p.344)

In brief, as far as Newman was concerned, no Anglican response had been adequate to rationalism, whether it be the ‘good enough’ moral knowledge approach passed down through Chillingworth or the Christian evidentialism of Paley’s school or even the brilliant fusion of approaches in Butler. They all in different and subtle ways had made their peace with Locke and paid their dues to the encroaching rationalist spirit and its severe epistemological canon. None of them, in Newman’s view, could be a permanent bulwark against faithlessness or prevent religious scepticism.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Basil Mitchell had it that ‘[m]ost of the time (especially in the university sermons) [Newman] is arguing with Whately and his other Oriel colleagues who champion the claim of reason as understood by Locke’[[48]](#endnote-49). In doing so, Newman was instinctively aware of Locke’s importance within a Protestant self-understanding and so courted hostility by being seen to oppose him. On the other hand, Newman was alive to the religious provenance of Lockean thought through the Latitudinarian tradition. This tradition, as has been argued, deliberately neglected revered sources as could inform first principles of reason in favour of a ‘thinned out’ ratiocination. Different motives were at play, among them, a hermeneutic of suspicion towards received belief, the mitigation through probabilism of a scepticism felt unanswerable, and the emancipation of the reasoner from hidebound traditions. Locke’s philosophy partakes of all this. His school effected a partnership between scientific progress and religion on terms deleterious to the latter. It made for the advance of religious rationalism and for a sterile apologetic for the things of faith.

Newman’s opposition to Locke’s view on knowledge is perceived in only a partial and perhaps distorted way when we neglect to attend to shifting religious currents and fundamental changes in intellectual imagination as they work into the reception of words, ideas and texts as we move to the modern philosophical era. When Newman opened his assault on Lockean inspired rationalism from the *University Sermons* through to the *Grammar* and onwards, he was really – though perhaps unwittingly – committing himself to a programme of epistemological recovery. In a sense, he could not help but do that because he had caught the vision of an encompassing religious holism in which the ‘unity of truth’ had first made the sense it did, from a conviction arising from a vision backlit by belief in God. Whilst the Movement did not rely on the scholastic intellectual framework (which would never get much of a hearing), all it required was the *vision*. This vision chimed with the scholastic one wherein ‘unity of truth’ had been born into its fleshed-out, organic, religious life. Of course, it took the particular genius of Newman to carry on the assault to its fullest extent. But it was only *because* he had this other vision of the unity of truth – a vision thicker than the thinned-out formal presumption of rationalism - that he *bothered*.

1. J H Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, (London: Longmans, 1903). Hereafter *GA*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. J H Newman*,* *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford* (London: Longmans, 1909). Hereafter *US*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. J H Newman, *The Idea of a University*, (London: Longmans, 1907). Hereafter *Idea*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. JH Newman, *Theological Papers of John Henry Newman*, vol. I, H M de Achaval SJ, J D Holmes, (eds.). Hereafter *TP* i. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, R Woolhouse (ed.), (London: Penguin, 1997). Hereafter *Essay*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. For Locke, intuition is ‘irresistible, and, like bright sunshine, [forcing] itself immediately to be perceived, as soon as ever the mind turns its view that way; and leaves no room for hesitation, doubt, or examination, but the mind is presently filled with the clear light of it. It is on this intuition that depends all the certainty and evidence of all our knowledge’ *Essay* IV.II.i. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. For Newman, reasoning to certitude operates on a ‘supra-logical judgment, which is the warrant for our certitude about them [our ordinary certitudes], … not mere common-sense, but the true healthy action of our ratiocinative powers, an action more subtle and more comprehensive than the mere appreciation of a syllogistic argument’(J H Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, (London: Longmans, 1903), 316-7). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. JH Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England* (London; Longmans, 1908), pp. 70-1. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. J H Newman, *Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), XXXI volumes, henceforth *LD* followed by volume number. *LD* I, p. 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Andrew Martin Fairbairn (1838-1912) was a Scottish theologian and Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford. He accused Newman of being a sceptic with regard to traditional arguments for God’s existence. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. A M Fairbairn, “Catholicism and Religious Thought”, *The Contemporary Review*, (May 1885). (online) Available at <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/error/fairbairn1.html> (accessed 02/12/2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Cf. *Idea,* pp. 158-9. Newman’s response: “I lay it down as a principle, which will save us a great deal of anxiety, that, though the useful is not always good, the good is always useful” (*Idea*, p. 164). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. ‘Locke gave the deathblow to the Catholic phraseology on that fundamental doctrine [the Holy Trinity] among the Anglican clergy; and it is surely undeniable, that such points as the Eternal generation of the Son, the Homousion, and the Hypostatic Union, have been silently discarded by the many, and but anxiously and apologetically put forward by the few’ (J H Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching Considered*, vol. i (London: Longmans, 1901),p*.* 24). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Richard Hooker (1554-1600) was an influential theologian of the Church of England. He is known chiefly for his *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594-7), which makes the positive case for a Christianity distinctively Anglican. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. John Tillotson was a noted preacher and Anglican divine who rose to prominence after the Restoration in 1660. He is seen to be at the wellspring of the Latitudinarian tendency within the established Church. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. William Chillingworth was a prominent controversialist of the 17th Century. One of his major works was *The Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation.* [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. N Voak, ‘Richard Hooker and the Principle of Sola Scriptura’ in *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, Vol. 59, Pt 1 (April 2008), p. 96. Voak takes sharp issue with this initial assessment. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. R Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (London: Clarke et al:, 1821), vol. 1, p. 268. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. W Laud, *A Relation of the Conference between William Laud and Mr Fisher the Jesuit* (Oxford: OUP, 1839), p. 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Diarmuid MacCulloch has it that Hooker was ‘an ambiguous force, whose pronouncements were sufficiently capacious for all sides to be able to quote him’ (D MacCulloch, “Richard Hooker’s Reputation” inT Kirby (ed.), *A Companion to Richard Hooker* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 586). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. For example, see *LD* XXV, p. 266. Henry Bleckly, an industrialist with a turn for philosophy, had written to Newman to point out how closely Hooker’s account of assent resembled the later Locke’s. In his *Ecclesiastical Polity*, there was a line: ‘[n]ow it is not required not can be exacted at our hands, that we should yield unto any thing, than such as doth answer the evidence which is to be had for that we assent unto’ (R Hooker, *On the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, p. 262). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. D K Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Characteristic of Latitudinarian epistemology was to place logical, physical and moral assent in order of decreasing certainty. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. M I J Griffin, *Latitudinarianism in the Seventeenth-Century Church of England*, R H Popkin (ed.), (Leiden: Brill, 1992), p. 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. ‘The key of the whole system is that God, since a God there is, *desires* and imposes it as a duty on men that they should seek Him and find how to please Him, and that being the case he will bless imperfect proofs, which there is no reason to show He will … [do] in matters of *science’* (*TP* i, p. 87) and cf. *J H Newman,* *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford* (London: Longmans, 1909), p. 216. Hereafter *US*. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. W. Hamlin, *Tragedy and Scepticism in Shakespeare’s England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 2005, p. 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Cf. R Popkin, ‘New Views on the Role of Skepticism in the Enlightenment’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, Duke University Press, (1992), pp. 279-97. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. In rough terms, Academic scepticism (of the sort Augustine of Hippo challenged) was dogmatic about the impossibility of knowledge. Pyrrhonism (at least as received through Sextus Empiricus) took things one step further in commending a real-time suspension even of our dogmatism about knowledge’s impossibility. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. For example, the French Jesuit François Veron was seen to be particularly adept at undermining Calvinist religious apologetics. The English religious controversialist, William Chillingworth, was not unfamiliar with Pyrrhonism and its power to unsettle attempts at rational justification of religious authority. For a detailed account of this, see R H Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. For example, see J H Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans, 1909)*,* pp. 178-82. Hereafter *Dev*. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. Likewise, it could be argued, the ancient atomists and pluralists tamed in their theories a Parmenidean thesis they found unanswerable. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. R H Popkin cites from a survey of scepticism written by Kant’s friend, C F Stäudlin: ‘There are in the life of many intelligent and thoughtful people times when the awakening of reason and their own examination of the teaching that they had up to then believed in, can bring about a condition of doubtfulness which will often be painful, convulsing their way of thinking and their emotional condition. This will be decisive in the formation of their character and their future life and happiness.’ R H Popkin, *The History of Scepticism,* p. 292. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Jack Lynch, ‘Samuel Johnson, Unbeliever’, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, Vol. 29, Number 3, (Fall 2005), Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 1-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. And perhaps also an example of the ‘affirmation of ordinary life’ observed as a characteristic of the modern identity. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. As the ‘norm of norms’ for the other Reformation rallying calls: *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *solo Christo* and *soli Deo Gloria*. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. See R Pasnau, ‘Medieval Social Epistemology: Scientia for Mere Mortals’, *Episteme*, Vol. 7, Issue 01, (February 2010), pp. 27-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. Boyle bequeathed a significant sum to ensure preaching in defence of the Christian religion continued in perpetuity. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. *TP* i, pp. 8-9. ‘We start with what we have received as children; we accept, we prize, we defend, what we have been taught; we may see difficulties in it, which we may not be able to answer, which may tease us, but they do not shake our confidence in it ... At length as our mind grows, as our information accumulates, as we see more of the world, and exercise more freely our minds, questions occur which really require an answer, and, of we are external to the Catholic Church, begin to impair the implicit trust which we have hitherto cherished in the creed whether from our parents or from our revered instructors. We gradually lose altogether that trust, which once was so simple, with or without the power of attaching ourselves to some other profession ... However, for a time we profess some other creed ... But the same process recurs, the mind goes on acting, it is filled with objections it cannot answer. It sees the bottomless depth which lies before it, and is unwilling to give up what though only a second, it feels to be virtually a last attempt to gain a hold upon the truth. It attempts to modify, and patch up its theory as best it can; it becomes eclectic, or it tries to throw itself upon authority ... it finds the attempt hopeless; and as time goes on it slowly and calmly is floated upon the open bosom of an ocean without a shore, the dead profound of interminable, hopeless, scepticism, in which nothing is believed, nothing professed, nothing perhaps even guessed at.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Perhaps Newman’s brothers are passable examples. Francis Newman, a distinguished scholar in his own right, was, like his elder brother, a youthful convert to evangelical Christianity. Unlike his elder brother, his religious journey proceeded earnestly through ‘phases of faith’ towards what seems a devout, iconoclastic Christianity mixed with mystical agnosticism. For more on this, see ‘Francis W. Newman – The Road to Baghdad’ in D. Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment: Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. For a discussion, see, for example, Jack Lynch, “Samuel Johnson, Unbeliever” in *Eighteenth-Century Life,* Volume 29, Number 3, (Fall 2005), Duke University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. F Parker, ‘The scepticism of Johnson’s Rasselas’ in G Clingham ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel* *Johnson*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 116. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. Cf. Charles Taylor, “Challenging Issues about the Secular Age” in *Modern Theology*, 26:3 (July 2010), Blackwell Publishing, pp. 404-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. Cf. *LD* V, xiii. Apparently, Pusey favoured this term instead of liberalism. Religious rationalism or liberalism was, in Newman’s view, the application of human reason to that to which it was not equal, that is, to the things of religious faith. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. See, for example, his sermon ‘Infidelity of the Future’ in *Faith and Prejudice and Other Unpublished Sermons,* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956). [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. J H Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London: Longmans, 1908), pp. 113-4. Hereafter *Apo.* [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. ‘I am not entering into the question whether Butler completed the developments of all his own principles …’ - Newman to James Stephens, March 1835 in *LD*, V, 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. He saw in Keble’s *Christian Year* an affective attempt to plant certainty where Butler’s probability was, but it would not stick – ‘it did not go to the root of the difficulty’ (*Apo,* p. 20). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. B Mitchell ‘Newman as a Philosopher’ in I Ker, and A G Hill, (eds.), *Newman After a Hundred Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 240. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)