The Semantics of the Grammar

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Newman’s intent to analyze the nature of religious language in the *Grammar of Assent* leads him to focus on two issues, the distinction between notional and real apprehension/assent, and the role of images in religious as opposed to theological affirmations. Both issues have been diversely interpreted, in part because Newman’s empiricist language sometimes constrains what he wants to say. Taking as point of departure his central insight that religious assent rests on the apprehension of God as present, I analyze the role of assent and of images accordingly.

This is a textual study, one which attempts to find, by following the strata of thought beneath the text, the underlying coherence of Newman’s analysis in the first half of the *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. By general admission, although the basic direction of his argument is manifest, there are a number of issues which obscure and perhaps even subvert the consistency of that argument. Two such issues are of concern here: the nature and place of images in real assent and the nature of apprehension.

The study is textual because there is no intent—quite the opposite, indeed—of “interpreting” Newman’s argument by putting it in language which he did not use. Any such translation, if it is not to be unintentionally a transformation, must first be clear about what Newman’s argument was. As the secondary literature shows, there is not a consensus about the way in which the parts of the argument hang together. One of the reasons for this—and perhaps there is a consensus here—is that the philosophical language in which he thinks constrains what he wants to say into formulations that are in tension one with another. One must try to discern, in what may appear to us to be an inadequate conceptual vocabulary, what Newman was thinking toward.

The approach to any serious text must keep in mind not only what the author says on the surface, so to speak, but also what is unspoken in the text. There may be things that are unspoken because they “go without saying” for the author, or there may be things unspoken because his thought has not yet come to sufficiently clear expression. Finally, there may be things unspoken in the text because they are unthought by the author. In this last case, we may have to understand an author better than he understood himself. But this possibility is not one to be entertained until we have tried hard to understand him with the aid of the first two supplementary categories. Hence what follows is not an attempt to understand Newman’s thought in the *Grammar*...
better than he understood it himself, but rather to try to understand it better than it came to expression in the text, and that requires thinking beyond, or rather beneath, the text.

To be sure, this is an enterprise which has its risks, since it seeks to bring to expression what it premises has not come adequately to expression in the text. But in addition to the control which a critical readership supplies, there is an internal criterion which can help to diminish the risk of reading meanings into the text instead of out of it. That criterion is that one should be able to understand why the author says what he does on each occasion, even if it seems at variance with what he says elsewhere, and why he doesn’t say what one might ordinarily have expected him to say.

The place to begin is not the beginning of the book, but rather its \textit{terminus ad quem}, its orienting goal, its central insight. It is not just that the opening sentence is forbidding ("Propositions—consisting of a subject and predicate united by the copula—may take a categorical, conditional, or interrogative form") as compared with, say, "It was a dark and stormy night," but rather that the distinctions made in the first chapters, and which we reasonably enough take to be the foundations for what will follow, get qualified almost beyond recognition as the exposition proceeds. Thus, e.g., notional and real apprehension seem to be defined at first in terms of whether the propositions apprehended are composed of common or singular nouns. But it soon becomes apparent that composition by common nouns is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for apprehending a proposition as notional, and composition by singular nouns is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for apprehending a proposition as real.

So, rather than take the climax of the first half of the \textit{Grammar} in Chapter V ("Apprehension and Assent in the matter of Religion") to be understood in the light of what has gone before, I want to go in the opposite direction and understand the logical and descriptive distinctions of the earlier chapters in terms of the nature of the central insight of Chapter V. What is that orienting thesis?

It is that what is essential to true religiousness is the awareness of, a real assent to, the presence of God in our everyday lives. True religiousness not only really assents to the existence of God, but speaks \textit{to} Him as here, \textit{sees} Him in the event, finds Him \textit{present} to the intimate life of the soul. True religiousness is not having the opinion that God exists—what Hume called the "religious hypothesis"—it is confronting Him "as if I saw" Him with my own eyes.

It is one thing to hear and understand the Word of God when one listens to the readings of Scripture at a Catholic mass. It is another thing to hear
oneself addressed by these words. The reader of the Scriptural passage ritually ends by saying, “This is the Word of God”: hearing those vocalized words, the believer normally, one supposes, gives a notional assent to them. Yes, the Bible is the Word of God. But if we hear the reader as saying, “This is God, speaking to you,” we may have quite another experience: a recognition, a real assent, that here and now I am being addressed by my Savior and Sovereign Lord, that he is literally here, speaking to me. So did St. Augustine in the garden of his house hear in the voice of a child a direct command by God to take up and read the Scriptures, and so did he know himself addressed, spoken to, by the words which he read.

Now the first thing to insist on is that this apprehension of the direct and immediate presence of God is the epistemological anchor of Newman’s reflections in the Grammar. His analysis of the nature of apprehension and of assent must be of such a kind as to make sense of this experience. The reason for insisting on this is that it sets Newman apart from the whole tradition of philosophy in which he thinks out his argument. From Descartes on through the long British empiricist tradition, the only things truly present to the mind are ideas or impressions. Although Newman’s empiricist terminology consequently stands in tension with his central thesis that the religious person “is in immediate relation” with, stands in the presence of, God (103, K78), this thesis is the Ariadne’s thread which will help to guide us through his pages.

In contrast, deism is a notional religion, based on a notional assent to the proposition that God exists. That is why deism is easily compatible with the philosophical tradition that the only things immediately present to the mind are its ideas. Even if the only things present are ideas, it can be reasonable to infer and to assent notionally to the truth of the proposition that God exists. Newman thought that much of the religiousness of his British contemporaries was notional in this sense. Indeed, he comments that the doctrine of God’s providence is “nearly the only doctrine held with a real assent by the mass of religious Englishmen” (64, K44). (To speak of “real assent” in the matter of religion is for Newman always to speak of the presence of the object of apprehension, to “see Him in the event”) (106, K81).

While for the typical Catholic, “the Supreme Being, our Lord, the Blessed Virgin, Angels and Saints,...are as present as if they were objects of sight...such a faith does not suit the genius of modern England” (62, K43). True religiousness is based on real assent, on real apprehension of the reality of the objects referred to by the terms of the proposition assented to, and in the matter of religion this always means (as I have noted) assent to the presence of the reality.

But now what does Newman understand to be the conditions of ‘real assent’? How does he understand the mind to be situated, constituted, in order
for real assent to be possible? A common response to this question is to say that he means that the proposition entertained is, first, apprehended as standing for objects external to the mind, and second, accompanied by vivid images of the objects, images which have the power to arouse and excite the emotions and feelings of the person. This response which is inadequate or at least misleading, is based on the pervasive use by Newman of terms like ‘image,’ ‘imagination,’ and ‘imaginative apprehension’ in his discussion, and on his assertion that images “are required for real assent” (80, K58). To clarify how this common response is misleading, some more detailed examination of his analysis is required.

II

First of all, images in the usual sense are not necessary for all cases of real assent. Newman originally illustrates his discussion of real apprehension, i.e., the apprehension of the terms of a proposition as standing for things external to the mind, by citing the case of perception. He speaks of the “phenomena of sense” and never, here or elsewhere when he is talking about perception by the senses, refers to images. Real apprehension and assent are based here on the fact that “we can actually point out the objects which [the words] indicate” (39, K22). When we formulate a proposition about a present perceived thing, the proposition expresses what we see and can point out: the reference of the terms is confirmed by the perceptual phenomena.

Second, he introduces the role of images by asking how real apprehension is possible in the absence of the thing referred to, and his answer is that memory can supply a facsimile of the object to which the proposition refers. The “facsimile” (39, K23) image of memory presents an object of which the proposition expresses the meaning, and memory assures us that the object is real, though absent from our perceptual phenomena. Hence we are in a position to assent to the proposition apprehended as referring to real things.5

Indeed, we can, within limits, compose or construct images of things which we have not seen, provided they are sufficiently similar to our past experience, and so be in a position to give real assent to reports of things or events from others. But it should be noted that Newman does not think this occurs very often, even when the propositions reported to us are eye-witness accounts. Even though propositions may be composed of singular nouns, names of persons, places or things, we normally apprehend and assent to them notionally.

Words which are used by an eye-witness to express things, unless he be especially eloquent or graphic, may only convey general notions. Such is, and ever must be, the popular and ordinary mode of apprehending language. On only few subjects have any of us the opportunity of realizing in our minds what we speak and hear about;... (46, K29)
When one listens to the morning news on the radio, although the sentences heard are largely about particulars, Newman would say that they are normally apprehended and assented to only notionally. (This is one of the reasons why a proposition composed of singular nouns for its terms is not a sufficient condition for real apprehension.)

Third, to come to the central issue, how can we give a real assent to the propositions of religion about the existence and nature of God, when what is affirmed in those propositions is a Being incapable by nature of perceptual appearance? How can I have an “imaginative apprehension” (95-6, K71) of the being of God, how can I “believe as if I saw” since “such a high assent requires [either] a present experience or [a] memory of the fact,” but “no one in this life can see God”?6

The standard response to this question, I believe, is to appeal to the role that is played or can be played in the mind of the religious person by “images.” True, there are no memory images of God, but perhaps we can compose some image not wholly inappropriate, or perhaps we can (as a recent book on the Grammar does)7 speak of the ordinary believer’s image of God as an old man, etc.

Even H. H. Price, whose chapter on Newman is one of the fairest and most thoughtful discussions, reads him in this sense. “I take his view to be that it is the use of images which gives an assent its ‘thingish’ character...,” and he reasonably asks, “Are we to suppose that...purely verbal thinkers [who have virtually no visual imagery] are incapable of being religious, though quite capable of being theologians?”8

It has already been implied that if we were to agree that “the use of images...gives an assent its ‘thingish’ character” then we would have to give the term ‘images’ a widened sense, because propositions expressing the meaning of phenomena are also given a real assent, and there are no images associated with them (or, more carefully: Newman never speaks of images in the context of perception). But I want to argue that the term ‘image’ has to be extended in another direction: namely, when the reality affirmed is not of this world.

Let us begin from the negative but significant fact that in his discussion in Chp. V of apprehension and assent in the matter of religion, Newman does not give any examples of the sort alluded to above (thinking of God as an old man), i.e., examples of “facsimile” images, images derived from the objects of perceptual phenomena. On the other hand, he speaks regularly in Chp. V of the role of imagination, and of ‘imaginative apprehension’ in religion. What is it that plays the role of images here, if not facsimile images?

Before trying to answer that question, recall the structure of his analysis of how religious assent, real assent, to the existence of God arises. He appeals to the inward “phenomena” of conscience, the sense of an imperative dictate
to do the right, of responsibility; of shame and guilt when we deliberately fail to do the right: all this, Newman argues, points to a standard and a sanction higher than the self. These phenomena confront the self with a call, a voice of conscience as we say, and which we "perceive" as the voice of "One to whom we are responsible," who has the right to command us. In these phenomena "lie the materials for the real apprehension of a Divine Sovereign and Judge" (101, 98; K76, 73).

Newman notes (several times; e.g., 68, 97, 102; K47, 72, 76) the parallelism of his argument here with the earlier analysis of real assent to propositions concerning things in the spatio-temporal world. Real assent (you will recall) can be grounded either on the perceptual phenomena by which things are presented to us, or in their absence, on memory (facsimile) images of the things which were presented by the phenomena. In the present case of the analysis of conscience, the phenomena are not those of the senses but of conscience: present to the mind, immediately given, these phenomena lead to the "perception" of a "Supernatural and Divine" Object (101, K76)

And now the critical issue of the argument can be stated with more precision: the phenomena of sense lead to the awareness of a real and present object, independent of the mind, and in the absence of those phenomena their role in real assent may be taken by images; and if in parallel fashion the phenomena of conscience lead to the awareness of a real and present but invisible Person, independent of the mind, then what plays the part of facsimile images in the matter of religion? What is the foundation for real assent to the presence of God when we are not experiencing the phenomena of conscience, e.g., when we are praying or meditating? In the case of sensible things, it is not, of course, the phenomena that are recalled by memory, but the real objects disclosed by those phenomena (39, K22). But God is invisible, so how can we have an image of him? And the answer will be, only notions and propositions formed of them can play that part.

Before explaining that answer, another element relevant for the argument must be retrieved. There is a dissymmetry in the parallelism which Newman draws between the analysis of real assent to propositions concerning spatio-temporal things and the analysis of conscience. Although he doesn't speak of an image of the object in the case of sense perception, he does ask in the case of the voice of conscience "how we gain an image of God" (97, K73). And it seems clear that the reason this is a question is just that although the phenomena of conscience are given, the object, namely God, toward which they direct the mind, is not capable of coming into view in their mode of givenness, in contrast to the way in which things come into view sensibly, commensurate with the sensible phenomena.9

So although we are directed toward things by the phenomena of sense, and we are directed toward God by the phenomena of conscience, just because
He is transcendent to the world, invisible by nature, we have to constitute an image for Him. That image, to put my thesis succinctly, is a notion, imaginatively apprehended.

Newman gives the example (103, K78) of a young child, whose religious instincts are uncorrupted, who has offended his parents, and who turns to God to beg Him to set him right with them. He "places himself in the presence of God." What is involved in that simple act?

...the impression on [the child's] mind of an unseen Being with whom he is in immediate relation...that he can address...One whose goodwill toward him he is assured of...One who can hear him...the image of an Invisible Being...who is present everywhere...One who...commands certain things...One who is good... (103-104, K78)

In short, the child has "an image, before it has been reflected on, and before it has been recognized by him as a notion" (105, K79). What makes the notion an "image" is that without facsimile images (for none are available from memory), it can be the vehicle of real apprehension.

Newman concludes this section on "Belief in One God" by saying that he has wished to trace the process by which the mind arrives, not only at a notional, but at an imaginative and real assent to the doctrine that there is One God, that is, an assent made with an apprehension, not only what the words of the proposition mean, but of the object denoted by them.... When the proposition [that there is One Personal and Present God] is apprehended for the purposes of...devotion, [the proposition] is the image of a reality.... Devotion must have its objects; those objects, as being supernatural, symbols, must be set before the mind in propositions. (108, 109; K82, 83)

As he remarks earlier in Chp. III, "the same proposition is to one man an image, to another a notion" (41, K24).

Hence in the distinctive case of the supernatural and invisible object God, the giver of real assent to the proposition that there is One Personal and Present God (and that He is good, etc.) imaginatively apprehends that very proposition, and it serves as the image which is necessary to real assent. The notions which compose that proposition (or those propositions), however notationally apprehended they may be for a speculative theologian (or for a less-than-normative believer), are capable of real apprehension. What is necessary for real apprehension is not facsimile images, but vivid singular reference, the apprehension of the terms as directing the mind to a real and singular object. This is why he does not give any examples in the religion chapter of facsimile images (God as an old man, etc.).

Why is this case different? Why isn't it possible thus to imaginatively apprehend other propositions standing for real things, without appealing to memory and facsimile images? Because these religious propositions are singular in being about a "supernatural," non-perceivable being whose present
presence is asserted, but for which neither perception nor images derived from it provide the ground for the assent to the reality.

And now perhaps it is clear in retrospect why from the start of his analysis of propositions, Newman has been at pains to stress that it is not the grammatical character of the terms of a proposition which determines how it is apprehended. Normally, indeed, singular terms, logical names, lend themselves to real apprehension, and as we have seen, he even begins by defining real apprehension by reference to propositions composed of singular nouns. And, normally, images in the sense of facsimiles of perceived things are of such singulars (persons, cities, events). But even in the case of propositions composed of singular terms, notional apprehension and assent is common, and even in the case of propositions composed of general terms, real apprehension and assent is not unusual.10

III

Two things need to be done before concluding. First, to indicate that this thesis is not as paradoxical as it may seem, that it consorts fittingly with the general framework of the Grammar. Recall that Newman distinguishes sharply, as Locke does not, between images and concepts (or notions). He has no single term, like Locke's 'ideas,' for all the variety of mental data. When he comes to speak of the "image" of God possessed by the young child, he makes it clear that the origin of that "image" is intellectual: "[the child's] mind reaches forward with a strong presentiment to the thought of a Moral Governor" (103, K78), and the child is "prepared to think of [truth, purity, justice, kindness, and the like] as indivisible...in one and the same Personality" (104, K78-9).

Moreover, he insists that assent is an intellectual act, not caused by images, even facsimile images, which only accompany and "intensify" the assent. So neither brilliant images nor singular terms are sufficient conditions for real apprehension and assent, and clearly singular terms are not necessary.

Are images a necessary condition for real assent, as he seems to say ("images are required for real assent")? It has already been argued that that comment cannot be taken strictly, because he scrupulously avoids speaking of "images" when discussing the real assent which is based on sense perception. There the "phenomena of sense" provide the material for the proposition. So we would have to take "images" in an extended sense, to allow for real assent in perception.

And so the second thing needing to be done is to suggest an extended sense, a characterization of "images" or of "imagination" which encompasses the variety of uses which have been delineated.11 I propose the following definitions:

"Imagination": not a faculty, but the functional property of presenting, in
vivid apprehension, the reality of the object toward which the mind is directed by a proposition, in the absence of its perceptual presence.

“image”: whatever mental entity is the vehicle of such vivid realization.

“to image”: to become aware of the object in this way, whether the vehicle be facsimile, composite image or proposition. (So, when Newman speaks of “imaging the thought of Him” (102, K76), he doesn’t mean associating facsimile images with the thought, but rather making the thought itself into an “image.”)\(^{12}\)

Thus “imaginative apprehension” doesn’t necessarily mean apprehension on the ground of facsimile images, but simply vivid apprehension of the reality of the object when it is not perceptually present. Imaginative apprehension is not coextensive with real apprehension, since the latter includes the apprehension of propositions expressing the sensing of perceptual objects.

To conclude: at the limit of our cognitive powers, the invisible God is apprehended, vividly apprehended, as present. The vehicle for this awareness in the person of true religiousness is not sense perception, not feelings, not facsimile images, but the proposition that the One God is Present. That proposition (and others like it) can be apprehended as a mere notional proposition, and normally is for the speculative theologian.

When I read the article in St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* entitled “That God is Everywhere by Essence, Presence and Power,” I am intent on the logic of the argument, on the logical relations between the meanings or the notions involved. Although I understand implicitly that the propositions are about reality, their reference remains latent for me, God’s immediate presence does not manifest itself even though I may assent, notionally, to the proposition as true. If I turn to devotion or meditation on that same proposition, however, I can have a heart-seizing sense of His direct and intimate reality. No pictures come into my mind, but the words themselves bear me into His presence, and that Presence itself arouses my feelings. I address Him in a way which never crosses my mind when I am concentrating on the logic of the argument. And that is what makes all the difference.

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**NOTES**

1. Hence I have tried to keep to Newman’s terminology and to state his analysis as far as possible in his language. I think that formulating the argument in the categories of intentionality could make it clearer for a contemporary philosophical reader.

2. This is the case with the *Grammar*, as the secondary literature, to say nothing of the text itself, shows. Newman was himself aware that his treatment of the issues involved had not been resolved into an integral whole: as he comments in a letter to J. Walker on

3. E.g. Locke, “...the mind...has no other immediate object but its own ideas, which alone it does or can contemplate.” Essay Concerning Human Understanding, IV:2.


5. Already in his first discussion of memory images, Newman broadens the term beyond the sense of images of perceptual phenomena to include “mental acts and states” (40, 41; K23-4). These are as individual as external things, and may be even more vividly recollected. Their distinction is not relevant to the argument at this point.

6. The fact that such indicative propositions are about a reality does not entail that they are apprehended as real. Notional assent is also assent to a proposition as true, but it is assent which, so to speak, halts at the meaning of the words. Sometimes, in Newman’s view, propositions are only about meanings, and their terms consequently have no reference. But even when the terms (e.g., singular nouns, proper nouns) have reference, that reference may remain latent, and the proposition apprehended only notionally.


8. H. H. Price, Belief (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1969), pp. 337, 326. Actually Price is doubly wrong here, since the phenomena on which Newman bases the religious sense of God’s presence are not visual or indeed sensible, but are those of conscience.

9. By the term ‘thing,’ I take Newman to mean: 1) logically, whatever can be properly named. A name (cf. P. Geach, Reference and Generality (Ithaca: Cornell, 1968), p. 52) can stand for something independently, i.e., outside of a proposition, wherein something is predicated of it. So naming expresses a complete thought (unlike a predicate), it can acknowledge the presence of the thing, and a common noun may so name. 2) epistemologically, what can be perceived or imaginatively apprehended.

10. One might want to conclude that for Newman, no term (and hence no proposition) is either notional or real, because noun-phrases, whether common or proper, can be apprehended in either way. But this conclusion would, if conceded, obliterate any relevance of the distinction between the grammatical categories. Although Newman does think that general terms can be apprehended notionally, he does not think that this fact reduces terms to some neutral category. General terms invite notional apprehension and singular terms solicit real apprehension, but de facto this normal gradient may be defeated: “there is a host of predicates...which, though they would be accounted common nouns, are in fact in the mouths of particular persons singular, as conveying images of things individual....” (41, K24). Quite apart from their apprehension in a particular case, however, one can speak of terms as belonging to one or another category: e.g., “Opinion...is a notional assent, for the predicate of the proposition, on which it is exercised, is the abstract word ‘probable’” (65, K45).

11. Nicholas Lash comments that Newman was “also puzzled” by the concept of imagination. In 1868, Newman wrote in his Philosophical Notebook, “I have not defined

12. For the same use of 'image' as a verb, cf. p. 97, K72: "we proceed on to the notion of a Supreme Ruler and Judge, and then again we image Him and His attributes in those recurring intimations...."