Education and the grammar of assent

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Introduction

J.H. Newman is surely known best for his landmark text *The Idea of a University*. In his most philosophical work, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, however, he undertakes a detailed investigation of different ways of knowing and understanding in ways that are of clear pertinence for philosophical enquiry into education. He offers many examples and descriptions of particular experiences, from religious and secular life, and on the strength of these he argues that before enquiry can take place there must first be a prior attentiveness: in Newman’s preferred terms, this involves an ‘assent’, a saying ‘yes’. There is an interesting resonance here with the work that occupied Wittgenstein during the last years of his life, which was edited and published posthumously under the title *On Certainty*. The importance Newman attaches to the notion of assent connects with Wittgenstein’s remarks on doubt and certainty, and later in the paper I shall explore the relationship between their views and their significance for a university education. I lay the way for this discussion, however, recognising the now much discussed dominance of a certain mindset, and specifically a conceptualisation of choice, in the contemporary university – a mindset in which the range of different ways of knowing and understanding is clearly constrained. I refer to dominant strands in the critique to which this has given rise, especially those arguments articulated by Alasdair MacIntyre and Alan Wolfe. This in turn leads into an acknowledgement of the wisdom traditions of Christianity and the different ways of knowing and understanding examined in *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*.

The conceptualisation of choice

The university mission statement and brand-image have become the defining expression of the university’s purpose: as the insignia of contemporary capitalism. They are an expression of a commitment to values that reflect not just a market economy but, as Michael Sandel observed in his Reith Lectures of 2009, a market society. They play an important role in what is a larger project of marketing, where the university has become a global industry and a key player in consolidating that society. It is not only that economic values are privileged over all else but that market thinking comes to permeate society as a whole. Central to such values is the prominence of a particular conception of choice.

While in some countries it has typically been the case that students have attended the university closest to their home, provision in others, especially Anglophone countries, has been characterised by variety: would-be students have been encouraged to select their university not primarily for geographical reasons but in the light of the courses on offer and the distinctive character and style of the institution. Such choice continues to be a feature of the scene today, but – in the UK especially - it has been altered by the fact that students now bear a far greater burden of the costs of their studies, and this has altered the character of the choice and the sense of what it is that is being chosen. Whereas in the past the student perhaps sought admission to an institution with standards and demands that they would strive to meet, it is now more likely that the choice will be exercised in relation to indicators of value-for-money and student satisfaction.

This new form of choice is apparent in other ways too. Technological developments may have helped overcome barriers to access in some ways, and they have also, more significantly, altered the nature of students’ engagement with and perception of university education. Prospective students and their parents/guardians can take virtual tours of a
university from their laptop or mobile phone and can compare and contrast to aid their choice about which course to study and where. Such information supplements the range of excellence indicators and surveys publicly available to aid in the choice of the right university – reflecting, for example, the number of first class honours and graduates finding employment in a particular institution, as well as providing ratings for the quality of the student experience.

Digital technology opens up new and creative opportunities in a medium suited to mobile societies and the demands of globalisation. Smartphones enable students to compare notes, exchange comments, access information on the internet in the course of their classes in a manner, just as they contribute to new forms of social interaction, where quite commonly people will be doing something with friends while at the same time running occasional chats or consulting information on their phones. Social media open new dimensions in human experience, with potential for a variety of things. They alter the fabric of experience, foregrounding life-style choice in new ways, and affecting the substance and image of the university. They project the model of the student, would-be or actual, as a discerning choosers, who becomes adept in the transferable skills appropriate to a mobile, global market society. They project the model of courses as efficient means to the delivery of these ends. The educational process is clearly set out in advance and can be achieved as efficiently and effectively as possible for preconceived ends – to become economically active global citizens.

There is a danger, however, that such developments promote a reductive conception of education, one that privileges choice and market values to the detriment of others.

In the cultural context dominated by market-conditioned choice, is it possible to move beyond the values of the market society and consider the relation between commitment to enquiry and reason. Elsewhere I have considered the ways in which this question has been addressed in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Alan Wolfe (Author, 2013); here I draw out those aspects of their work that are pertinent to the present paper.

MacIntyre’s critique of the modern university concerns the fragmentation and specialisation of the curriculum and the absence of any shared enterprise in the contemporary university; it is, he regrets, no longer clear what the purpose of the university is. This he argues is in sharp contrast to the pre-modern university where there was a shared understanding and consensus over fundamental beliefs.

A similar view is evident in Alan Wolfe’s reflections on his study of the place of evangelical protestant colleges in American intellectual life, in the course of which he visited Wheaton College, Illinois (Wolfe, 2000). Here all students are expected to be dedicated Christians, and they have to sign a pledge not to smoke or drink. Academics must confirm their commitment to the College’s mission in a yearly written statement and sign a pledge to respect the Christian values of the College. They must also demonstrate how they can approach their studies from a Christian perspective. In his observation of lectures, Wolfe was particularly struck by the fact that, in spite of the very strict rules and demands, the college seemed to have attracted high-achieving students and to have succeeded in fostering a flourishing intellectual life. Wolfe comments on the sense of vibrancy and energy among students and staff, and by a level of openness and eagerness to enquiry often not found in large secular institutions.

Although MacIntyre and Wolfe approach these questions from quite different perspectives, their focus is on institutions within the Western Christian tradition. It is, therefore, important to consider this tradition and, in particular, the bearing on higher education which theologians have called the ‘wisdom traditions’. (Melchert, 1995)
Wisdom traditions

It is worth drawing attention to a number of factors about the Christian tradition that should be central to this enquiry insofar as it is conceived within the wisdom traditions. The first is that the western tradition is inherited from a range of ideas and works that originate in Greek, Egyptian, and Babylonian writings. Second, a common feature of literature of the period is the multiple authorship of wisdom texts. (See, Zuckerman, 1991) Third, in the wisdom traditions, knowledge and the sacred are inseparable, and knowledge and faith are connected. And fourth, sacred and secular thinking existed alongside each other from the very beginning.

In the Old Testament wisdom is regarded as a divine gift, and true wisdom is said to come from those who acknowledge the sovereignty of Yahweh: fear of the Lord is the beginning of all knowledge – the precept that, as we saw, became the motto of Aberdeen University. In the words of a renowned scholar of Old Testament Theology, Bernhard Anderson, the quest for wisdom is the quest for the meaning of life (Anderson, 1975). James Crenshaw, another Old Testament scholar, describes its conception of wisdom as addressing ‘natural human and theological dimensions of reality, and constitutes an attitude towards life, a living tradition, and a literary corpus’ (Crenshaw, 2010, p.16). Such accounts reflect ideas expressed in the religious texts themselves, of which the following lines from Proverbs are indicative:

> To know wisdom and instruction;
> To perceive the words of understanding;
> To receive the instruction of wisdom,
> justice, and judgement, and equity;
> To give subtlety to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion.
> (Proverbs 1:2-4, KJV)

On the face of it, it would not be strange to find here the expression of sentiments that reflect appropriate commitments of a university education, although resistance to such a connection can readily be imagined. One possible response would be to bracket these lines as a ‘religious text’, which would be a way of recognising that these words were written at a time and in a world very different from our own, but which might also be the gesture of a contemporary anxiety with religious language. To settle for this would indeed be an evasion of the challenge that these thoughts provide, and of the way they provide them today. We need to see the subtlety in things and in the workings of the world and not rest with simple, obvious explanations. We should not routinely seek easy solutions – say, the route that most efficiently hits the target outcomes of the module of study; and we should not be designing university courses in ways that promote this.

In the wisdom traditions there is a constant questioning, an on-going enquiry that requires discernment and judgement. Often this involves making the strange familiar and the familiar strange so that the reader is provoked to think again, to see things differently or to take different ideas or thoughts from the original text. (Author, 2012) Against settled secular assumptions and the relentless self-reinforcement of contemporary forms of capitalism, we need to recognise the centrality of interpretation to higher level study, and to teach knowledge, discretion, and judgement. These are the kinds of skills and abilities that
graduates will need throughout their lives, and to appreciate this properly will be to retrieve notions of skill and ability from their contemporary, degenerate, behaviourist forms. It is important, however, that they are not conceived as individualised lists of competences or as transferable skills, both of which would suggest that learning and knowledge are individualised, reduced to what can be easily measured, and largely divorced from the contexts of their exercise. The nature of contexts is such that they inevitably include a background, and this is a background in which belief in one thing or another is always necessarily at work. The force of texts such as the lines from Proverbs quoted above is that they contribute to an imaginary in which ‘the art of social life’ and ‘fitness for the world’ can be conceived.\textsuperscript{vii} In the next section the relationship between assent and knowledge will be considered more directly.

Assent

In modern western thinking, as we saw, true/false or value/fact dichotomisations thought have tended to be dominant. Yet, when it comes to understanding the lived experience of human beings, the former tends to lose sight of the variety of things we do with words, while the latter is now widely discredited. We have different ways of assessing our existence and place in the world, and different ways in which we find meaning in our lives; the religious believer, for example, will understand these and express them differently from one who has no religious belief.

Newman’s philosophical work as expressed in An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent (hereafter the Grammar of Assent) is particularly relevant here because, although a committed Christian, he examines in great detail examples of belief that relate to both religious and secular life. Newman agreed with Aristotle’s view that ‘all men by nature desire to know’, and that wonder is the first step to knowledge; for Newman, faith is at the base of all knowledge. In the Grammar of Assent, which he wrote in response to the growing attraction of the scientific method and a conception of knowledge conceived scientifically, Newman undertakes a detailed investigation of different ways of knowing and understanding, offering many examples and descriptions of particular experiences. He draws a distinction between theory and dogma, on the one hand, and religious belief, on the other; the former he describes as involving notional assent, while the latter is constituted by real assent. In the following this is brought out by a contrast, within religion, between ‘the religious’ and ‘the theological’:

A dogma is a proposition; it stands for a notion or a thing … To give a real assent to it is an act of religion; to give a notional, is a theological act. It is discerned, rested in, and appropriated as a reality, by the religious imagination; it is held as a truth, by the theological intellect. (The Grammar of Assent, p. 98)\textsuperscript{viii}

Religious certainty is not proved logically or empirically; religious belief is not a matter of following a theoretical argument. Yet this does not mean that assent is irrational:

Religion has to do with the real, and the real is the particular; theology has to do with what is notional and the notional is the general and systematic. Hence theology has to do with the Dogma of the Holy Trinity as a whole made up of many propositions; but Religion has to do with each of those separate
propositions which compose it, and lives and thrives in the contemplation of them. In them it finds the motives for devotion and faithful obedience; while theology on the other hand forms and protects them, not merely one by one, but as a system of truth. (Ibid., p.140).

It is not only in relation to religious belief that one can see a different kind of reasoning but in our everyday lives as well. Newman argues that no matter how systematic an enquiry is, there is always something that is assumed; this is not only the case in religion but in science and other fields of enquiry. Before there can be any deduction or analysis there must, first, be a prior attentiveness, or, in Newman’s terms, an assent, a saying ‘yes’. This assent must be live before induction or deduction or empirical analysis can take place. He provides numerous examples of how this works, including examples drawn from mathematics and, more specifically, the certainty that the British Isles are islands. Although this is a rational belief it is not acquired by means of rational or theoretical argument: it is taught in childhood and appears on maps and in books (p. 294). It becomes part of our world-view.

Newman also distinguishes between notional and real apprehension. The former is deductive: we know something through arriving by way of logical argument at a conclusion, provided the premises are true. The latter, real apprehension is quite different: it does not come from the force of logic but from an open-ended range of factors that together constitute proof. This process of coming to knowledge is achieved through the use of what Newman terms the ‘illative sense’. This refers to the capacity to make judgements, and it is an intellectual capacity that is shaped by experience. He again gives some examples, including Newton’s perception of mathematical truths, in cases where proof is absent, absent, and Napoleon’s genius in reasoning and interpretation, ‘without apparently any ratiocinative media’ (p. 334). Evaluative judgements are involved in the formation of beliefs, but these are not always the result of empirical analysis or any logical deduction: they are the result rather of habit. Judgement is developed by practice and experience.

In no class of concrete reasonings, whether in experimental science, historical research, or theology, is there any ultimate test of truth and error in our inferences besides the trustworthiness of the Illative Sense that gives them its sanction; just as there is no sufficient test of poetical excellence, heroic action, or gentleman-like conduct, other than the particular mental sense, be it genius, taste, sense of propriety, or the moral sense, to which those subject-matters are severally committed (p. 359).

Newman anticipates Wittgenstein’s view that explanation must come to an end somewhere and that a human being cannot stand outside their mind or escape its language and thought.

Belief

Although Wittgenstein does not refer to Newman in his writings, there is good reason to believe, from conversations recorded by his friends, that he was interested in Newman’s work, in particular his method of logical investigation, which is most clearly visible in the Grammar of Assent. Newman, as Wittgenstein also, was not concerned with putting forward theories but wanted rather to draw attention to particulars and give examples of how words are used within a framework of beliefs and everyday practices. Both attach great importance to a world-view, or in Wittgenstein’s term Weltbild (world-picture), within which language
operates. Wittgenstein’s interest in religion and the religious aspect to his thought are also well known: Michael Kober (2006) makes an important observation about Wittgenstein and religion to the effect that most of his remarks on religion are just that - personal remarks. He did not offer a philosophy of religion or coherent account of religion other than to argue for the need to distinguish between science and religion. Wittgenstein’s interest was primarily in religious beliefs or attitudes, and this is probably because these are linked to reflections on his personal life. What mattered greatly in his philosophy and personal life was the spirit in which things were done. He believed that one of the things Christianity holds most closely is that “sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your life” (italics added). He told his friend Maurice O’Connor Drury that ‘if you and I are to live religious lives, it mustn’t be that we talk a lot about religion but that our manner of life is different’ (Monk, 1990).

For Wittgenstein a belief, religious or otherwise, is not an isolated proposition but part of a wider network of propositions and practices that make up a world-picture; beliefs are inherent in such networks, not merely in the obvious sense that they relate to specific propositions but also in the way that they reflect a broader orientation to life, and it is this that provides the background and gives the framework for enquiry. One difficulty Wittgenstein observes is ‘to realise the groundlessness of our believing’ (PI, #166). He illustrates this in terms of the work of the scientist:

Think of chemical investigations. Lavoisier makes experiments with substances in his laboratory and now he concludes that this and that takes place when there is burning. He does not say that it might happen otherwise another time. He has got hold of a definite world-picture – not of course one that he invented: he learned it as a child. I say a world-picture and not hypothesis, because it is the matter-of-course foundation for his research and as such also goes unmentioned (#167).

What he intends by world-picture here is to defuse the belief that there must be a secure foundation in the sense of a foundation of certain beliefs. Later he writes:

You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable).
It is there – like our life (#559).

It is not reasonable or unreasonable because something other than ratiocination must be at work here. Its being there like our life is suggestive of our living with it in a relation of tacit assent, which may be revealed to falter at times, perhaps in times of crisis, but which otherwise is the condition for the operation of our reason. This need not necessarily imply anything quite like religious belief, and in any case the level at which it is there ‘like our life’ implies something below that of the conscious entertaining of putative beliefs. It is there in what we do. And it is crucial that Wittgenstein’s conception of religion depends upon belief extending downwards, as it were, into this level of practice, characterised by a kind of assent or acceptance of a world-picture. Religious belief needs to be understood in terms of a way of living; a religious belief provides guidance for life. In Lectures on Religious Belief, the following is recorded:
Suppose someone were a believer and said: “I believe in a Last Judgment”, and I said; “Well, I’m not sure. Possibly.” You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us…

It isn’t a question of my being anywhere near him, but on an entirely different plane, which you could express by saying: “You mean something altogether different, Wittgenstein.”

The difference might not show up at all in any explanation of the meaning.”

Suppose somebody made this guidance for life: believing in the Last Judgment. Whenever he does anything, this is before his mind. In a way, how are we to know whether to say he believes this will happen or not?

Asking him is not enough. He will probably say he has proof. But he has what you might call an unshakeable belief. It will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for all in his life (Wittgenstein, 1966, pp. 53-4).

Wittgenstein’s target here is scientism. He argues that there is no empirical method by which we could settle the matter. The statement ‘I believe in the Last Judgment’ is not a belief that is assessable on a truth table; it is not the result of a calculation. It expresses an attitude towards human life. For Wittgenstein philosophy does not begin with the process of questioning and with the suspension of assent. He argues that assent must come first. To doubt something is already to take something for granted.

Here there is some resemblance to Newman for whom assent is acceptance without any condition. In the Grammar of Assent, he expresses it in the following terms:

After all, man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating animal. . . Life is not long enough for a religion of inferences; we shall never have done beginning, if we determine to begin with proof. . . Life is for action.
If we insist on proofs for every thing, we shall never come to action: to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith (p. 94).

There is another interesting resonance in the work that occupied Wittgenstein during the last years of his life. This takes the form of notes on the themes of knowledge and certainty, which were edited and published posthumously under the title On Certainty.

In On Certainty, Wittgenstein argues that the act of believing precedes doubt, logically and psychologically. The child, he points out, learns by believing the adult; doubt comes after belief. The child begins by trusting its parents and teachers. In a mathematics lesson we are taught ‘twice two is four’, and this is a mathematical proposition: to learn this is more like being guided by a rule than coming to learn a new fact about the world (PI, Ilxı, pp. 226-7). Similarly, Wittgenstein’s insights into language in use point to there being no reasoning without the prior giving of assent in one way or another.

Concluding remarks
Early in this paper I acknowledged the way that the privileging of economic value in a market society and the collusion of technology with this have promoted a reductive view of a university education: commodification deflects attention from richer and more legitimate visions of the university. In the course of this I examined some contrasts explored by MacIntyre and by Wolfe between universities characterised by a religious or other distinctive ethos and those with no shared understanding. This provided a way into the more specific question of the relation between faith (religious or not) and reason. Whilst no one questions the university’s commitment to the pursuit of reason, there is by no means agreement about the notion of faith; this is probably because of the tendency to understand faith in primarily religious terms.

As we have seen the insights provided by Newman and Wittgenstein, specifically in respect of the notion of assent, bring out a deeper more persuasive point. Newman’s assent does not derive from logical or rational deduction; there is always something assumed. What this is, is informed by the background of a way of life. Newman argues that the formation of beliefs is not solely the result of empirical analysis or logical deduction: evaluative judgement is always involved. The ability to make such judgements is the result of habit and social practices, where judgement is exercised and developed through habit and experience. Wittgenstein also draws our attention to the importance of a background of beliefs and practices and which is a feature of the world of the human being. The beliefs we entertain, reason about, and question are always dependent upon a background of practices, comprising things we do and beliefs that for the most part we do not consciously consider but that hold fast for us; such beliefs and practices extend to and comprise a Weltbild (or world-picture). It is this that gives the framework for enquiry; and it is because of this, Wittgenstein argues, that it can be seen that belief precedes doubt.

If we are persuaded by the preceding argument then at some level teaching must involve a profession of belief in something. This could be a belief in the contribution of education to the public good or to a healthy democracy; it could also be a belief in the intrinsic value of the subject being taught as internal to such goods. This again would be to cast the university less in the position of servicing the needs of the economy and more in that of constructive critic and cultural innovation for the society to come. This is not, however, to suggest that what is most needed is consensus or the kind of shared practice advocated by MacIntyre, where the importance of a shared community of belief is emphasised. It is rather to think in terms of our being, first and foremost, members of a community of language and, hence, of our being responsible for our words and what we do with them. Each of us must make judgements about what we say irrespective of whether or not we are part of a coherent community; ultimately that responsibility is one we cannot escape or opt out of. A university education rightly conceived – that is, that level of education whose essential purpose must be to extend and enrich the languages of enquiry - should not shrink from this responsibility.

References

Author (2012, 2013)
There is a literature on this but this is not the focus of this paper.


See for example, European Commission Communication (2005) *Mobilizing the Brainpower of Europe: Enabling Universities to Make Their Full Contribution to the Lisbon Treaty*.

MacIntyre argues, however, that such a shared understanding and consensus is not the preserve of religious institutions. He offers as an example the Marxist university in the former Soviet Union, based as it was on theoretical atheism which provided a framework within which each of the academic disciplines finds its own place; it is against such a shared background that meaningful critical exchange can take place (MacIntyre, 2009).

There is not space in this paper to consider other religious traditions.

The term ‘secular’ is problematic and can be interpreted in various ways. Charles Taylor offers a helpful and insightful commentary on this in his impressive, *A Secular Age*.

In Discourse IV, Newman describes the art of the university as ‘the art of social life’ and its end as ‘fitness for the world’ by which he meant that the university should not only be judged on the educational achievements of its students, or the success in securing employment, but on the contribution of both to the good of society and the world.

Newman notes that human beings cannot act or think without the acceptance of truths. He distinguishes between simple assent on the one hand and complex assent and certitude on the other. Simple assent refers to those taken for granted things such as, ‘I believe that Britain is an island’, and ‘I have parents’. I don’t normally feel the need to provide a justification for either of these statements but could do so if the occasion arose where these were called in to question. Newman wants to contrast such taken for granted kinds of assent or those which are based on prejudices, to those which are more complex. In the religious life, for example, he wants to say that complex assent involves deliberation and certitude, which he describes as a normal and natural state of mind; certitude is for Newman the highest quality of religious faith. Assents may and do change but certitude does not; it endures.

His interest for example in Tolstoy’s confession of 1879, which Kober argues prompted Wittgenstein to write in relation to this in his notebooks 1914-16, ‘To believe in a God means to see the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning’ (cited p.98).
As is well known, Wittgenstein’s work is commonly understood as having two main phases, represented most obviously by the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. Of the main texts assembled from his notebooks after his death, *On Certainty* is the most celebrated. The notes are in part a reaction to Moore’s, ‘Proof of an External World’ (1939). Wittgenstein thinks that Moore does not distinguish between claiming to believe and claiming to know, and that the claim to knowledge is never a guarantee of truth. Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (2004) has advanced the view that this text constitutes a distinct departure from the *Investigations*, and while this is less radical than the earlier change in his views, it nevertheless warrants being referred to as the ‘third Wittgenstein’. The present article does not seek to take a position on whether such a claim is justified. It does, however, draw on the extensive attention Wittgenstein gives in this phase of his writing to beliefs that stand fast for us but for which we do not normally require demonstration or proof. Such a line of thought is certainly not entirely new in Wittgenstein’s writings. His remarks on religious belief and, especially, his earlier writings on Frazer’s *Golden Bough* foreshadow his treatment of this topic.

The word faith originally meant loyalty to a person or to a promise and only from the 14th century was it used to refer to Christian belief. According to the etymology dictionary, *belief* used to mean “trust in God” but by the 16th century had become limited to “mental acceptance of something as true” while faith, as cognate of Latin *fides*, took on the religious sense.

In a sense, the expression ‘community of language’ should be pluralised. We are members of communities, and languages are diverse. The challenges we are exposed to in translation exemplify the responsibility of judgement as well as its importance and inevitability (see Author, 2012).