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Vulnerability and perfection: the failures of St. John Henry Newman

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ABSTRACT

J. H. Newman, canonized in October 2019, is remembered as a prominent cleric of the Anglican Church who converted to Catholicism at the peak of his career. Many are acquainted with his *Idea of a University* and his theological insights. However, a detailed look at his life reveals another facet: a profoundly human man. Newman's writings portray his liability to suffering and how he embraced it in his relationships with God, others and the institutions he served. Most of the projects he undertook were met with strong opposition; he did not recant from his ideas nor resolutions, but neither did he see them come to fruition. He was sustained by the awareness of God's life within his, along with an unwavering commitment to truth. The appreciation of his life and works from a 150-year perspective, along with the recent public recognition of the holiness of his life, provides a robust platform for a deeper understanding of vulnerability and failure as the birthplace of perfection in the Christian life.

KEYWORDS

disability studies; practical theology; religion

Introduction

John Henry Newman (1801–1890) was an Oxford fellow who held a prominent position in the Anglican Church before embracing Catholicism halfway through his life. Deeply immersed in the controversies of his time, he wrote over 20,000 letters, which complement his *Autobiographical Writings*, thousands of homilies and dozens of published works. He made valuable contributions to theology, particularly regarding the understanding of belief-formation, the development of doctrine, and the conscience. His *Idea of a University* is his most well-known work, which continues to inform the reflection on liberal education.

However, the study of Newman's life, beyond his scholarly work and the projects he undertook, reveals another central aspect of his personality: a profoundly *human* man. Although he was well respected by protestants, terrarium and catholics alike,¹ and 150 years after his death he is perceived

as a successful individual, who possessed an outstanding intellect and an upright heart, a detailed study of his biography shows that Newman endured much contradiction at every stage of his career, and that most of his projects failed in one way or another. Newman had considerable personal limitations and flaws, and his pastoral endeavors were tainted with constant frustrations. The consideration of his life from this angle makes him a fit subject to study the notion of vulnerability understood as a deliberate openness to take risks and a liability to suffering.

Without pretending to display a full account of Newman's career, this article discusses well-selected incidents to ponder the interplay between vulnerability and perfection. The argument is developed as follows. The first section offers an account of five episodes in Newman's life in which he met with failure in a harsh way. The second section introduces a few concepts, among them Brown's notion of vulnerability and Eiesland's theology of disability.² These concepts provide a theoretical framework for the third section, which explores some aspects of the interplay between vulnerability and perfection in the Christian life.

Failure in Newman's life

Newman's first significant encounter with failure occurred during his undergraduate studies in Oxford. In 1817 he enrolled in Trinity College, and three years later was due to take his final examinations. One of the first books he studied was Thomas Scott's *Essays*, where he found the two maxims that shaped him as a young man: "holiness rather than peace" and "growth the only evidence of life". Although he zealously prepared for his exams, studying 13–14 hours a day, he gravely underperformed due to his lack of experience and maturity (Ker, 2010, pp. 13–14).

Newman (1956, p. 47) explains in his *Autobiographical Writings* (written in the third person) that "he had overread himself, and, being suddenly called up a day sooner than he expected, he lost his head, utterly broke down, and after vain attempts for several days had to retire". Although it was a disastrous week, he was able to secure a degree with the lowest possible marks, and two years later, he obtained a fellowship. The reversal of his first examinations did not deter him in his academic career, but instead taught him the value of resilience and perseverance in the face of contradiction.

Once a fellow in Oriel College, Newman sought to reform the tutor system so it would lead to more incisive and fruitful relationships among professors and students. He insisted on having personal influence over his pupils' moral and intellectual formation; however, the Provost, Edward Hawkins, thought his role should be limited to imparting lectures as it was

more cost-effective for the college. Since Newman would not yield, Hawkins decided not to assign him any students, leading his short career as a tutor to an abrupt end in 1829. Mark Pattison (1885, p. 87), also a fellow at Oriel, explains that “the Provost’s proposal that all undergraduates should be entered under one common name, and no longer under respective tutors, interfered with Newman’s doctrine of the pastoral relation. This was the point which Newman would not give up, and for which he resigned, or rather was turned out”.

This incident shows that early in his career, Newman met with opposition, but chose to admit defeat rather than compromise his beliefs. The end of his tutorship proved providential, as it allowed him to have the necessary time to continue his studies and take a six-month trip to the Mediterranean along with Hurrell Froude, a close friend of his who would die an untimely death in 1836. These events provided the occasion for the beginning of the Oxford Movement, of which he has widely been acknowledged as the leader.

The Oxford Movement sought the revival of the Catholic principles that supported the Church of England. Its primary vehicle was the *Tracts of the Times* and Newman’s sermons from the pulpit of St. Mary’s. The group of men who rallied around Newman and took on this cause were known as the Tractarians; in eight years, they wrote 90 *Tracts*, of which Newman wrote 29, including the first one and the last one. He energetically promoted the personal ownership of the *Tracts* stating in 1834 that “no great work was done by a system; whereas systems rise out of individual exertions [...]. This is the way of things: we promote truth by a self-sacrifice” (Newman, 1978, vol. 4, pp. 307–308).

Although Newman was passionately devoted to the Oxford Movement, his foremost loyalty was to the truth and ultimately he accepted defeat, not only from the Bishops of the Anglican Church, but from the testimony of antiquity. Seven years after he preached the sermon that marked the beginning of the Oxford Movement, which hinged upon his understanding of the Anglican Church as a *Via Media* between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, Newman realized that his beliefs did not hold historically (Nockles, 2018, p. 18). He narrated in his *Apologia*:

For a mere sentence, the words of St. Augustine, struck me with a power which I never had felt from any words before. To take a familiar instance, they were like the “Turn again Whittington” of the chime; or, to take a more serious one, they were like the *Tolle, lege, –Tolle, lege*, of the child, which converted St. Augustine himself. *Securus judicat orbis terrarum!* By those great words of the ancient Father, interpreting and summing up the long and varied course of ecclesiastical history, the theory of the *Via Media* was absolutely pulverized (Newman, 1913, p. 117).

Newman allowed the new evidence he found in his research to pulverize an idea which he had held dear for several years. Once more, he chose the failure of his project over the compromise of his principles, and continued studying and publishing from this new-found perspective. The climax of his work in the Oxford Movement came with the publication of *Tract 90* in 1841, where he advocated for a Catholic interpretation of the *39 Articles* that provided sustained the Anglican Church.

While “*Tract 90* marked a real watershed in the Movement’s history [and] within a fortnight of its publication, 2,500 copies had been sold” (Nockles, 2018, p. 19), it was not well received by the Anglican Bishops. Newman had been advised to stop its publication, but he firmly believed that his first loyalty was to truth itself, not to popularity. When he was officially asked by the Episcopate to suppress *Tract 90*, he replied that in conscience he could not do it; however, he agreed to discontinue the publication of the *Tracts* on the condition that *Tract 90* was not censured. Thus the most consequential stage of the Oxford Movement came to a halt, and Newman left Oxford, accepting semi-retirement in Littlemore.

Four years later, he asked to be received into the Catholic Church. He wrote to his sister Jemima at the time:

I have a good name with many; I am deliberately sacrificing it. I have a bad name with more; I am fulfilling all their worst wishes and giving them their most coveted triumph. I am distressing all I love, unsettling all I have instructed or aided. I am going to those whom I do not know, and of whom I expect very little. I am making myself an outcast, and that at my age. Oh, what can it be but a stern necessity which causes this (Newman, 1978, vol. 10, p. 595).

Although Newman (1913, p. 331) described the moment of his reception into the Catholic Church as “coming into port after a rough sea”, it cannot be said that peace and quiet followed his monumental decision, but rather more contradiction than he ever experienced in the Anglican Church. The decade of 1850–1860 proved to be particularly trying for Newman on several fronts.

One of Newman’s first concerns after being received into the Catholic Church was to find a spiritual home. He was attracted to St. Philip Neri’s Oratory because of its latitude, democratic spirit and respect for individual freedom, and was granted permission to start the first Oratory in England, provided that he adapted the rule to fit the needs of the English faithful (Quinn, 1990, p. 109). On February 1, 1848, the Birmingham Oratory was established. The original founding members, all of them converts, were soon joined by another budding religious community, the Wilfridians, which had formed around William Faber. Newman not only faced suspicion from cradle Catholics who were doubtful of the authenticity of his

conversion, but he also had to deal with the internal division brought on by Faber and his followers. Within two years, the group had split into two independent houses, one in Birmingham directed by Newman and another one in London directed by Faber, and “only six years after the houses were founded the Oratorians became enmeshed in bitter feud” (Quinn, 1990, p. 106). Beaumont (2018, p. 41) explains that while proclaiming his total “submission” to Newman as founder and superior, Faber quickly displayed a spirit of independence and even insubordination. His extreme emotionalism and Newman’s hypersensitivity also combined to make misunderstandings and conflict inevitable. Independently of this clash of personalities, the ideas of the two men diverged radically.

Although initially the division of houses eased the tension, the relationship between both Oratories would be a profound source of suffering for Newman for the rest of his life.

Division and tensions were not only Newman’s lot at home, but also abroad. Although in 1863 he wrote in his diary “from first to last education, in this large sense of the word has been my line” (1956, p. 259), the truth is that in his educational endeavors, “everything failed. Reforming the Oxford tutorial system. A Tractarian hall of residence. A Catholic university in Ireland [. . .] Yet John Henry Newman is considered a great educator, and not just by his devotees” (Barr, 2018, p. 48). While Newman was leading the Oratory in its first decade of existence in England, he was asked by Archbishop Paul Cullen of Dublin to found the first Catholic university for the English speaking world in Ireland. From 1851 to 1858, Newman dedicated most of his time and energy to this endeavor, crossing St. George’s Channel 56 times.

Cullen’s first request was that he write a series of lectures to persuade the Irish faithful to support this nascent catholic university over the well-established Queen’s Colleges, which were sustained by government funding. After being appointed as rector in November 1851, he delivered five lectures that went far better than he expected (Ker, 2010, p. 380). Within a year, he completed nine discourses on the scope and nature of university education, which he later incorporated into *The Idea of a University*. These discourses, still discussed today, proved to be the most fruitful and consequential effect that the Catholic University of Dublin had in the long run.

Although Newman exerted himself in advertising and recruiting professors and students, the university ultimately failed. Newman “thought that laymen should have the day-to-day management of the university [. . .] the Irish Episcopate, however, was not ready for these ideas and resented having an English convert in charge of an institution in their country” (Velez, 2011, p. 530). Complementing this understanding, Barr argues that “the University’s fate was influenced by a number of causes, including Irish

obstructionism, Newman's own personality, and the refusal of the British government to grant it a charter to award degrees" (2018, p. 48). Regarding Newman's personality, he writes: "although a compassionate friend, dedicated priest, and insightful spiritual advisor, Newman lacked what might be called practical empathy. In any matter touching his own character, reputation, plans, status, or beliefs he rarely saw the other point of view or the constraints under which others operated" (Barr, 2018, pp. 60–61). All these factors led Newman to resign as rector in 1857, and fully retreat from the project by 1859.

Not even a year passed before Newman suffered another blow. Following the desires of his own Archbishop, William Ullathorne, he assumed the editorship of *The Rambler*, a periodical founded by a Catholic convert, intending to make it more favorable toward Rome. He was soon rejected by most of the English Episcopate when he advocated for consulting the laity on practical matters related to the life of the Church. By suggestion of Ullathorne, in the second and last number of *The Rambler* Newman edited, he published his well-known essay entitled *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*. This essay ignited further controversy, and Newman was accused of heresy.³ The Holy See asked for clarification, but the request never reached him. This episode deeply saddened Newman and made him retire from public life. A moving letter from 1861 to Maria Giberne offers a glimpse of the state of his soul:

As for me, my writing days are for the present day over. The long cares I have had, the disappointments of religious hopes, and the sense of cruelty in word and deed on the part of those from whom I deserved other things – a penance which I have had in one shape or another for 30 years – at length have fallen on my nerves, and though I am otherwise well, I am sent here to be idle (Newman, 1978, vol. 20, p. 38).

Although Newman's grappling with failure and limitations (his own and those of others) continued until the end of his life, these instances suffice to show that "Newman had the 'Midas touch' in reverse. Oxford, Littlemore, and Dublin were all sites of failures [...]. Interestingly enough, hardly anyone today thinks of Newman as anything but a rousing success story" (Stravinskis, 2004, p. 16).

Vulnerability and perfection

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines vulnerability as "the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally" (Vulnerability, 2020). This understanding often carries a negative connotation, identifying vulnerability as an obstacle the person should conquer before she can achieve her goals. However, through her extensive

research, Brown (20102020) has come to see vulnerability as “the willingness to do something where there are no guarantees”, which comprises “the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change” Brown (20122020). For Brown, vulnerability is not a state to be overcome, but rather an indispensable condition for the person to effect change. A leader’s vulnerable involvement in relationships, whether with subordinates or peers, allows her to create more empathetic and meaningful connections, which often yield an increase in trust and open possibilities for bold action (Shapira, 2013, p. 24).

Likewise, Eiesland’s research on disability has proven to be remarkably innovative. Although her study focuses on persons with physical disabilities, which she contrasts to temporarily able-bodied people, she acknowledges that intellectual, social, and emotional disabilities carry similar consequences to physical disabilities (Eiesland, 1994, pp. 24–28). She builds her theological developments upon her insight that “the disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability” (Eiesland, 1994, p. 100). She grounds this affirmation in the resurrection accounts, where Jesus Christ not only reveals his wounds, but *reveals Himself through his wounds*, and writes:

Our bodies participate in the *imago Dei*, not in spite of our impairments and contingencies, but through them [...] What is the significance of the resurrected Christ’s display of impaired hands and feet and side? Are they the disfiguring vestiges of sin? [...] Or should the disability of Christ be understood as the truth of incarnation and the promise of resurrection? The latter interpretation fosters a reconception of wholeness. It suggests a human-God Who not only knows injustice and experiences the contingency of human life, but also reconceives perfection as unself-pitying, painstaking survival (1994, p. 101).

Eiesland challenges the traditional understanding of holiness, which requires an absence of physical limitations, as sanctioned by the book of Leviticus (21:17–23).⁴ Instead, she proposes as the paradigm of holiness the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, where she sees the revelation of a vulnerable and limited God by whose wounds, which he has chosen to keep, humanity has been healed (Isaiah 53:5).

Brown’s and Eiesland’s research converges in the notion that vulnerability is not only compatible with wholeness or perfection, but it is an indispensable means toward them. Few, if any, would deny that vulnerability is an inherent condition of being human; however, this article not only affirms this but argues that vulnerability is an essential condition for human plenitude. This claim is recognized by Cooreman-Guittin (2018, pp. 2–3) who adds an eschatological perspective by arguing that “the truth is

not behind us, it is in front (...). Creation did not spring forth complete from the hands of the Creator, the universe was created in a state of journeying (*in statu viae*) toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained, to which God has destined it". Being *in statu viae*, human existence necessarily shares in the mystery of God's holiness *by means of* its limitations and its journey toward perfection. Then, vulnerability and limitations, defects and failures, are not only compatible with the fullness of life but are its condition and path.

The understanding of vulnerability as a limitation brings to mind Hauerwas' work, which introduces it as a requirement for love (Swinton, 2004, pp. 102–105). Hauerwas maintains that love and vulnerability are intrinsically connected, since love's acceptance of the possibility of not being reciprocated, or even mistreated, implies an increased vulnerability to suffering. Such understanding leads Hauerwas to conclude that dependence, vulnerability, and weakness are not a deficit to be eliminated, but a revelation of God and of our most authentic self to be embraced.⁵ Following this line of thought, personal limitations are to be cherished as an asset since they lead the person to recognize her need for others (God and community), and thus obtain her genuine good, enabling her to love, exercise cooperation, and flourish alongside her peers. In this way vulnerability becomes a condition for human perfection.

Such an understanding of perfection marked by vulnerability challenges the more traditional and prevalent idea of holiness, which considers it to be a state void of any imperfection or defect. Furthermore, perfection thus understood defies the notion of an impassive God who is incapable of self-limitation out of love. When vulnerability is recognized as a condition for perfection, a paradox arises: vulnerability is not seen as an obstacle that distances the person from God, but as a means that allows her to love like him. Analogically speaking, it can be said that God himself is vulnerable since he accepts the risk of being hurt and rejected by human freedom; moreover, through his vulnerability, God reveals an aspect of the infinite freedom of his being.

Since these concepts have only gained ground in the 21st century, and Newman lived in the 19th, he was undoubtedly unaware of their theoretical understanding. However, his life shows how vulnerability and even failure, are means for freedom and perfection. Although he met with failure countless times, "Newman had the gift for beginning each new work as if it were the first he had ever tackled" (Davies, 2001, p. 123). The setbacks he suffered did not embitter him nor diminish the generosity with which he embraced every new project; Newman did not protect himself from possible disappointment with a suit of armor but remained open and always willing to assume new risks.

Open questions and final considerations

The limitations and failures revealed through a careful examination of Newman's life, along with his constant vulnerability to suffering and rejection, seem to be the pre-condition for the fulfillment and fruitfulness which ultimately characterized his life and ministry. When he received the honor of the Cardinalate in the Catholic Church, shortly before his death, he exclaimed:

In a long course of years I have made many mistakes. I have nothing of that high perfection which belongs to the writings of Saints, namely, that error cannot be found in them; but what I trust I may claim throughout all that I have written is this – an honest intention, an absence of private ends, a temper of obedience, a willingness to be corrected, a dread of error, a desire to serve the Holy Church, and through the Divine mercy, a fair measure of success (Newman, 1905, pp. 63–64).

As it has been discussed, a careful reflection upon Newman's life shows that his vulnerability paradoxically turned out to be a condition for his success and "perfection". This reflection upon Newman's experience offers an entry point to ponder the universal human experience of vulnerability, which everyone lives to a lesser or greater extent. Every person, male or female, newborn or elderly, more or less talented, experiences vulnerability, limitations, and failure. The attempt to understand the nature and finality of this condition opens up several avenues for reflection: Does vulnerability serve a higher purpose, or is it only a deficiency to be remedied? Could vulnerability be an entry point to a realm of experience without which the person would remain incomplete? What does it mean to grow in vulnerability? These questions veil the great questions of perennial philosophy: "What can I know? What should I do? What can I expect? What is man?" (Kant, 2000, pp. 66, 92). Newman likely pondered these questions, posed in one form or another.

A further query appears: the relation of Newman's experience of vulnerability to his awareness of God's life within his own. These two factors, vulnerability and awareness of God's presence within, appear to be correlated at first sight; however, further investigation is needed to detail the path of Newman's growth in faith, hope and love by means of the trials he endured. Newman's philosophical and theological inquiries, his insights into rational knowledge and even his existential decisions are better understood from the vantage points of his experience of vulnerability and limitation.

Indeed, a noteworthy characteristic of Newman's work is his recognition of the individual's limitation in the access to the truth and ultimately to God's mystery.⁶ The category of mystery is highly adequate to explain how Newman deals not only with God, but also with the Church, and the

human person, as he sees in these realities not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be pondered. For Newman, “mystery is not a restraint on one’s intellect, but is rather recognition of human imperfection and inability to absorb truths superior to its capacity to receive” (Ekeh, 2015, p. 82).

The person’s limitation in understanding mysteries is combined with her linguistic limitation. Newman illustrates this reality using the image of a field contemplated at twilight in which one can ambiguously distinguish shapes and simultaneously gather light and darkness (Newman, 1907, vol. 1, p. 42); his well-known epitaph, *ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*, points in the same direction. Newman’s understanding of the profound bond between reality and mystery springs from the experience of his limitation and the fruits it yielded.

This discussion of some of Newman’s mistakes and failures in the projects he undertook has not intended to develop a new *Apologia* for his life. However, it does offer some insights into his personality and the apparent success he enjoyed. A careful reading of Newman’s life portrays a well-versed Christian, an educated gentleman, and a loyal friend. It also discloses a vulnerable yet intrepid man, obedient to his conscience and deeply committed to the truth, amidst the lights and shadows of his times. Above all, it reveals a free man, free in the expression of his convictions, free in his relationships with others, and free to embark on solitary paths.

What sustained Newman along the way? Perhaps the experience of faith that accompanied him since his conversion when he was 15 years old, which was encompassed by the realization of the unquestionable existence “of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator” (Newman, 1913, p. 108). This experience of faith allowed Newman to live in God’s presence and to prefer holiness rather than peace, granting him an unshakeable confidence, comfort, and joy (Ekeh, 2011, p. 51). Newman’s experience of God’s life within him explains freedom he lived in his relationships with others and his search for truth. In Newman’s life, God was “a kindly Light” that led him from shadows into light, “one step enough for him”.

Notes

1. When he was 76 years old Newman received an Honorary Fellowship from Oxford and two years later he was made a Cardinal in the Catholic Church, both are considerable honors for someone in his position. The day after his death the editorial of *The Times* remarked: “Will Newman’s memory survive in the estimation of his country? [...] That is a question which may be asked today, but which the future only can answer. Of one thing we may be sure, that the memory of his pure and noble life, untouched by worldliness, unsoured by any trace of fanaticism, will endure, and that whether Rome canonizes him or not he will be canonized in the thoughts of pious people of many creeds in England” (Glancey, 1890, p. 250).

2. Brené Brown PhD, LMSW (1965–present) has conducted extensive research on the nature of vulnerability over the past decade; she has authored seven books on related subjects and her TED 2010 and 2012 talks have been viewed over 60 million times. For her part, Nancy Eiesland PhD (1964–2009) is considered a pioneer of the theology of disability; her major work being *The Disabled God* (1994).
3. A letter from Msgr. George Talbot, secretary of Pope Pius IX, to Card. Henry Manning, primate of England, relates the opinion that some men in the Hierarchy had of Newman: “Dr Newman is the most dangerous man in England, and you will see that he will make use of the laity against Your Grace” (as cited in Purcell, 1896, vol. 2, p. 318). For most of his life as a Catholic, Newman patiently endured the misunderstanding of the Episcopate.
4. Different approaches to the concept of holiness, which complement one another, seem to coexist in the Judeo-Christian tradition. A first approach is found in the priestly institution of the Leviticus, which is closely bound with ritual purity and physical perfection. A second approach is that of transcendental holiness, in which holiness can only be attributed to God Himself (cf. Isaiah 6:3). A third approach entails a moral conception of holiness, which God Himself asks of his people: “Be holy – perfect – as your Heavenly Father is holy” (Matthew 5:48). The merits and limitations of each of these approaches are beyond the scope of this article. Acknowledging that any approach is insufficient when understood in isolation, the approach in this paper is that of Leviticus, as it seems to be the one chosen by Eiesland.
5. Describing weakness as “the experience of a peculiar liability to suffering. A profound sense of inability, both to do and protect even after great effort, to author, perform, effect what we have wanted or with the success we would have wanted, an inability to secure one’s own future, to protect oneself, to live with clarity and assurance or to ward off shame and suffering” Buckley asserts that weakness is part of the essential structure of a life of service and self-giving to others (2016, p. 84).
6. Newman’s doctrine regarding the mystery of God and its accessibility to reason bring to mind Gabriel Marcel’s understanding of the person’s limits and possibilities to know the truth (Marcel, 1965, p. 117).

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