

Relecciones

Revista Interdisciplinar de Filosofía y Humanidades

nº
01

HACIA UNA NUEVA RACIONALIDAD

NOVIEMBRE 2014



Artículo extraído del número 1 de *Relecciones*

ESTUDIO

John Henry Newman on Faith and Reason

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RECIBIDO / RECEIVED 13 de marzo de 2014

ACEPTADO / ACCEPTED 27 de marzo de 2014

PÁGINAS / PAGES De la 47 a la 56

ISSN / ISSN 2386-2912

John Henry Newman on Faith and Reason

La fe y la razón en John Henry Newman

The author explains how, in contrast with the risk “of the twin reduction of faith to a mere emotive principle and reason to a mechanical exercise”, Newman seeks to re-define and widen the concepts of reason and philosophy, so that, free from rationalism, philosophy and reason can again give sense to one’s lived experience. A reason so widened by the “experience of life” and by a living heart will be much more able to welcome a faith which is given to it not as a right, or as syllogism, or as a burden, but as gift of love. Thus, faith is no longer seen as something irrational, distant, accidental, as if it were a simple “private preference”. Instead, it becomes a very reasonable and warm impulse that changes man’s perspective over his existence and his Christian commitment, and transfigures him towards a life of holiness.

#Faith-and-reason #assent #widening-reason #experience-of-life #Christianism

El autor explica cómo, en contraste con el riesgo de reducir la fe a una “emoción” y la razón a un “ejercicio mecánico”, Newman propone redefinir y ampliar los conceptos de razón y de filosofía para que, liberadas del racionalismo, puedan volver a dar sentido a la vida real. Una razón así ampliada con “experiencias de vida” y con un corazón palpitante será mucho más capaz de acoger una fe que le es ofrecida no como un derecho, un silogismo o una carga, sino como un don de amor. En consecuencia, la fe deja de percibirse como algo irracional, ajeno y accesorio “como un gusto personal”, y se convierte en un impulso auténticamente razonable y cordial que cambia la mirada del hombre sobre la existencia y el cristianismo y transfigura su vida en santidad.

#Fe-y-razón #asentimiento #razón-ampliada #experiencia-de-la-vida #Cristianismo

In one of the ironies of nineteenth century English Catholic history, one of Newman's most famous converts, Gerard Manley Hopkins, twice offered to write an introductory commentary on Newman's *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. Newman responded that a commentary was unnecessary arguing that "if it is worthless, a comment, however brilliant, will not do more than gain for it a short galvanic life, which has no charms for me." (Newman, 1883: 191). Contemporary readers might well regret the failure to realize the commentary and that for many reasons. Hopkins had argued to a friend that

"the book is perhaps heavy reading. The justice and candour and gravity and rightness of mind is what is so beautiful in all he writes but what dissatisfies me (in point of style) is a narrow circle of instance and quotation – in a man too of great learning and of general reading – and a want, I think, a real want of brilliancy.... But he remains nevertheless our greatest master of style... and widest mind." (Hopkins, 1873: 226).

But we get perhaps a deeper sense of Hopkins' misgivings about Newman's very personal style in a later letter to Coventry Patmore in which he complained that the style of Newman's correspondence suffered from its conversational tone, seemingly an odd complaint, especially in light of the occasionally tortured self-consciousness of Hopkins' own correspondence. But he insisted that

"Newman does not follow the common tradition of writing. His tradition is that of cultured, the most highly educated conversation; it is the flower of the best of Oxford life. Perhaps this gives it a charm of unaffected and personal sincerity that nothing else could." (Hopkins, 1887: 260).

Implicitly, Hopkins was pointing to Newman's characteristically very personal style evident in his philosophical work and suggesting the limitations of his willingness to press an argument without relying upon the assistance of authorities. Others have noted this as well. However, one might suggest that Newman's weakness, in so far as it is a weakness, is also his strength. Edward Sillem has noted that

"only he who understands the meaning of the Cardinal's 'cor ad cor loquitur' and who is prepared to read as though Newman were present in the room actually speaking what he is here and now reading, can come to share Newman's vision of reality with him and see him as a philosopher." (Newman, 1959: 6).

He noted that Newman

"wrote little but letters, sermons and discourses he prepared to give to people he knew. He never wrote a mere impersonal treatise on philosophy for students he did not know or understand; he wrote as a person for friends, not as a professor for students at large, and he always presupposed that his reader would be prepared to read him as he would listen to him, or read a book by a personal friend. Thus reading Newman is an experience of thinking about concrete realities, but thinking about them with Newman himself in the personal kind of way we would enter into discussion with a friend." (Newman, 1959: 6).

In his ongoing reflections on reason's apparent conflict with faith in the Oxford University Sermons, Newman had stressed the importance of a right understanding of their specific nature and relations in light of the twin reduction of faith to a mere emotive principle and reason to a mechanical exercise. In correspondence with his brothers Charles and Francis, who in dissimilar ways struggled with the plausibility of the claims of religious faith, Newman considered "the rejection of Christianity to arise from a fault of the heart, not the intellect; that unbelief arises, not from mere error of reasoning, but either from pride or from sensuality." (Newman, 1825: 219). He insisted that

"Christian evidences are most convincing yet that they are not likely to convince those who reject them. A dislike of the contents of Scripture is at the bottom of unbelief; and since these contents must be rejected by fair means or foul, it is plain that in order to this the evidences must in some sort be attacked. But this is quite an afterthought; and thus unbelievers reverse the legitimate process of reasoning, and act in a manner which would be scouted as unfair were they examining Newton's *Principles* or Lavoisier's *Chemistry* – Hence the most powerful arguments for Christianity do not convince, only silence; for there is at bottom that secret antipathy for the doctrines of Christianity, which is quite out of the reach of argument. I do not then assert that Christian evidences are overpowering but that they are unanswerable; nor do I expect so much to show Christianity true as to prove it rational; nor to prove infidelity false, so much as irrational." (Newman, 1840: 230).

He argued that there were very few religious men in any age, for faith demands a venture, a risk which few men are really willing to take. Instead they attempt to live a life of self-improvement rather than of conversion. The invitation to the life of faith is finally personal and here Nicholas Lash is right to suggest that

"the primary purpose of all of Newman's reflections on faith and reason is apologetic, and its standpoint personal. Newman undoubtedly wished his arguments to be subjected to philosophical criticism and yet if we would catch the weight and significance of those arguments we must continually bear in mind that here Newman speaks as a controversialist. He seeks to prove by persuasion rather than persuade by proof." (Lash, 1979: 12).

Newman was confident that his own personal reflections disclosed a wider common apprehension of the truth which was discovered through a complex personal journey to a common destination. This confidence is expressed as well by Pope John Paul the Second when he argued that

"All men and women... are in some sense philosophers and have their own philosophical conceptions with which they direct their lives. In one way or other, they shape a comprehensive vision and an answer to the question of life's meaning; and in the light of this they interpret their own life's course and regulate their behavior." (*Fides et Ratio*, n. 30).

Newman recognized well before others that the prevailing optimism of Victorian culture masked a fundamental shift in which even the appearances of a Christian culture would soon disappear. The age was moving he repeatedly insisted to a collision of real ideas and the decisive choice

between Catholicism and rationalism could not long be postponed. But the problem was that the understanding of the operations of both faith and reason had become corrupt, faith increasingly understood as a subjective feeling or sentiment, and reason as a mechanical and impersonal analysis of evidences.

And so Newman insisted on the older Catholic principle that faith was an intellectual act accompanied by an exercise of the will and could not then be understood as a mere sentiment or emotion. Again Lash noted that

"The contrast between faith and reason is not for Newman a contrast between belief and unbelief or between irrationality and rationality but between two modes of rationality. Thus, although faith may be viewed as opposed to reason... it must not be overlooked that unbelief is opposed to reason also. In the last analysis, everything will depend on one's starting point. That is the first principles or foundational assumptions which guide rational inquiries." (Newman, 1840: 230).

As Newman noted in one of his *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, "Religious Faith Rational," "When faith is said to be a religious principle (I repeat) it is the thing believed not the act of believing them which is peculiar to religion." (Newman, 1868 a: 191). From this point of view, rather than opposing faith to reason, Newman's achievement was to redefine faith in terms of a wider concept of reasoning than had been current since the 17th century. The kind of reasoning that Newman thinks leads to religious belief is neither strictly logical nor empirical but which we use and assume to be reliable and valid in all kinds of subject matters: there are all kinds of truths which we take for granted and yet which we cannot prove either by logic or by sense perception. And this is especially true of the most important questions of life, for example the immortality of the soul, the love of a friend, the discernment of a vocation, the choice of a spouse. In each of these cases, one is required to assent to the truth of a situation or a person without being able to sum up all the evidence which had supported but not proven the rightness of the judgment. And yet our lives, properly speaking, depend precisely on judgments of this kind.

Newman's preference for the Fathers over the more systematic treatment of the scholastics is well known. It reflects not only his own conviction that it was the Fathers who made him a Catholic but also a deep sense that the Fathers wrote in a style

"which more than any other represents the abundance of the heart, which more than any other approaches to conversation. [...] They mix up their own persons, natural and supernatural, with the didactic or polemical works which engaged them. Their authoritative declarations are written, not on stone tablets, but on what Scripture calls 'the fleshly tables of the heart'. The line of their discussion traverses a region rich and interesting, and opens on those who follow them in it a set of instructive views as to the aims, the difficulties, the disappointments, under which they journeyed on heavenward, their care of the brethren, their anxieties about contemporary teachers of error. Dogma and proof are in them at the same time hagiography. They do not write a *summa theologiae*, or draw out a catena, or pursue a single thesis through the stages of a scholastic disputation. They wrote for the occasion, and seldom on a carefully digested plan." (Newman, 1917: 221, 223).

It is in this sense that Newman described the limits of logic in particular, and scientific reasoning in general. The narrow scope and range of logic was both its strength and its weakness. "Such", he said,

“are the characteristics of reasoning and we might anticipate that, narrow as by necessity is its field of view, for that reason, its pretensions to be demonstrated were incontrovertible. In a certain sense they really are so; while we talk logic we are unanswerable; but then on the other hand, this universal scene of things is after all as little a logical world as it is a poetical; and as it cannot without violence be exalted into poetical perfection, neither can it be attenuated into logical formula. Abstract can only conduct to abstract; but we have need to attain by our reasonings to what is concrete; and the margin between the abstract conclusions of science and the concrete facts which we wish to ascertain, will be found to reduce the forces of the inferential method from demonstration to the determination of the probable.” (Newman, 1870: 215).

As he insisted in the “Tamworth Reading Room,” “...man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feelings, contemplating, acting animal. He is influenced by what is direct and precise.” It is very well, he said, “to freshen our impressions and convictions from physics, but to create them we must go elsewhere.” He insisted that “the heart is commonly reached, not through the reason but through the imagination, by means of direct impression, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us. Many a man will live and die upon a dogma; no man will be a martyr for a conclusion. A conclusion is but an opinion...” And he stressed that

“Life is for action. If we insist on proofs for everything we shall never come to action; to act you must assume; and that assumption is faith.... If we commence with scientific knowledge and argumentative proof or lay any great stress upon it as the basis for personal Christianity, or attempt to make man moral and religious by libraries and museums, let us in consistency take chemists for our cooks and minerologists for our masons.” (Newman, 1882 a: 293-296).

In this sense, Newman recognized that most of the nineteenth century debates concerning the rationality of religious belief and practice were artificially restricted to what he called notional apprehension and assent. He was as unhappy with this restriction as he was with the alternative strategy, common among a number of Protestant apologists, to settle for a non-cognitive character of religious discourse. Late in his life, he agreed that it was important to “show that there is no contradiction between scientific and religious truth, yet is was not there,” he thought, “that the shoe pinched. The fact was that it was not reason that is against us, but the imagination.” (Newman, 1882 b: 162).

He was struck by the fact that in concrete matters reasoning is not reducible to formula. The pursuit of truth is not exclusively a syllogistic process and he stressed in the eleventh Oxford University sermon that

“the experience of life contains abundant evidence that in practical matters when their minds are really roused, men commonly are not bad reasoners if only because the principles which they possess guide them unerringly to their legitimate issues. Certainly people may argue badly, but they reason well, that is their professed grounds are no sufficient measure of their real ones, which they do not or cannot produce of if they could, not prove to be true on latent or antecedent grounds which they take for granted.” (Newman, 1839 b: 211).

What Newman sought to defend was the certainty of faith's judgments for men and women who lacked philosophical training, that one could believe what one did not understand and believe with certitude what one could not demonstrate. Because God intends the salvation of all it could not be the case, he insisted, citing Saint Ambrose, that it was by means of logic that God chose to save his people. "If children," he insisted, "if the poor, if the busy, can have true faith, yet cannot weight evidence, evidence is not the simple foundation on which faith is built." (Newman, 1839 c: 211). Again, John Paul II stressed the same point, arguing that in Christianity the "elitism which had characterized the ancients' search for truth was clearly abandoned. Since access to the truth enables access to God, it must be denied to none." (*Fides et Ratio*, 38). In Christianity there is a fundamental rejection of the gnostic principle of elitism in which only an enlightened or intellectually refined minority could be expected to grasp the mysterious truths of faith. Since Newman had argued that life is for action, he also shared John Paul's conviction that the martyrs are the "most authentic witnesses to the truth of existence, not in their abstract knowledge of the truth but in a dynamic relationship of faithful self-giving with others." (*Fides et Ratio*, 32-33).

Newman insisted that faith must be rational not merely an act of prejudice (and here it is important to recall the fact that Newman is not speaking only of religious faith but of this process of implicit reasoning in concrete matters which is contracted with scientific or formal inference). He argued that faith is an unconditional judgment and that it cannot therefore directly depend upon evidence for in that case it would cease to be unconditional. At the same time, he assumed that there are grounds for the rational judgments of faith but that these evidences were not self-evident, that each of them in isolation was merely probable but as they accumulated and converged produced the capacity to arrive at certitude. Some have compared Newman's move from inference to assent, from a conditional to an unconditional judgment, to Kierkegaard's great act of obedience, the leap of faith of Abraham. But as Nicholas Lash has noted, Newman never leapt anywhere in his life. Rather for Newman,

"the structure of proof in concrete matters is not linear. Proof in concrete matters does not lie (so to say) on one line, as the stages of a race course (as it does in the abstract) but is made up of moments converging from various directions, the joint force of which no analytical expression can represent." (Lash, 1979: 16).

In this sense, Newman stressed that although it is true that an "iron rod represents mathematical or strict demonstration," one could contrast it with a cable which "demonstrates moral demonstration, which is an assemblage of probabilities." And he continued, "A man who said, 'I cannot trust a cable. I must have an iron bar,' would in a certain sense be irrational or unreasonable." (Newman, 1864: 146). Lash noted that Newman's "most illuminating metaphor for this process of proof is that of the movement whereby a regular polygon inscribed in a circle, its sides being constantly diminished tends to become that circle, as its limit... a proof is the limit of converging probabilities. How then is the gap between probability and certainty closed?" Again as Lash noted, "the image of the polygon expanding into the circle leads to a different question. Is it not the case that we discover the margins to have been cancelled, and thus the gap to have been closed?" (Lash, 1979: 17). John Paul II clearly draws on Newman in making a similar argument in *Fides et Ratio*. "In believing", he wrote,

"we entrust ourselves to the knowledge acquired by other people. This suggests and important tension. On the one hand, the knowledge acquired through belief can seem an imperfect form of knowledge, to be perfected gradually through

personal accumulation of evidence; on the other hand belief is often humanly richer than mere evidence, because it involves an interpersonal relationship and brings into play not only a person's capacity to know but also the deeper capacity to entrust oneself to others, to enter into a relationship with them which is intimate and enduring." (*Fides et Ratio*, 32).

One grows rather than leaps into conviction. The discovery that we have come to hold a certain belief or set of beliefs may be sudden but on reflection we can usually see something of the process whereby these beliefs were cumulatively, slowly and often painfully acquired. This helps to explain Newman's insistence that all conversions, whether religious or intellectual, are of a positive character, that is they express a slow but rational development of the first principles or assumptions with which one began, and one comes to a new judgment not to reject what one held in the past but rather to bring to a fuller expression. In this sense faith has both moral and intellectual dimensions since he noted "a good and a bad man will think very different things probable." In his tenth university sermon, he cited Saint Paul's definition of faith as the substance of things hoped for, and he said that "In the judgment of a rightly disposed mind, objects are desirable and attainable which irreligious men will consider to be but fancies." (Newman, 1839 a: 191). It is in this sense that one is responsible for his faith because he is responsible for his desires, for what he pays attention to and ignores.

Nonetheless Newman was well aware that most of us neither know nor live out of our deepest desires. We tend to live on the surface and adapt to what he called the religion of civilization, the religion of self-respect. In a characteristically demanding sermon he argued that one of the basic obstacles to the grace of faith was a wholehearted embrace of and dependence upon nature.

"A smooth and easy life, an uninterrupted enjoyment of the goods of Providence, full meals, soft raiment, well-furnished homes, the pleasures of sense, the feeling of security, the consciousness of wealth -- these and the like, if we are not careful, choke up all the avenues of the soul through which the light and breath of heaven might come to us. A hard life is, alas! no certain method of becoming spiritually minded, but is one of the means by which Almighty God makes us so. We must, at least at seasons, defraud ourselves of nature if we would not be defrauded of grace. If we attempt to force our minds into a loving and devotional temper, without this preparation, it is too plain what will follow -- the grossness and coarseness, the affectation, the effeminacy, the unreality, the presumption... in a word what Scripture calls the Hypocrisy which we see around us; that state of mind in which the reason, seeing what we should be, and the conscience enjoining it, and the heart being unequal to it, some or other pretense is set up, by way of compromise, that men may say 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." (Newman, 1868 b: 337-338).

There is a tendency, he argued, in modern culture to adopt a passive attitude toward faith, seeing it as a private taste rather than a divine gift or judgment. Kierkegaard, too, had complained that the modern age was most wretched precisely in this passivity of mind and will, the terrible inability or unwillingness to choose. One is reminded of Dante's haunting image of the trimmers in the third canto of the *Inferno*, a vast crowd, so vast that Dante could not believe that death had undone so many and who were unworthy of the beauty of heaven and the wickedness of hell for they were guilty of having lived for themselves and were therefore without infamy or praise.

"Many are too well inclined to sit at home. Instead of surrendering themselves to inquire whether a revelation has been given, they expect its evidences to come to them without their trouble; they act not as supplicants, but as judges. Modes of argument such as Paley's, encourage this state of mind; they allow men to forget that revelation is a boon, not a debt on the part of the Giver; they treat it as a mere historical phenomenon. If I was told that some great man, a foreigner whom I did not know, had come into town as was on his way to call on me, and to go over my house, I should send to ascertain the fact, and meanwhile I should do my best to put my house into a condition to receive him. He would not be pleased if I had left the matter to take in chance, and went on the maxim that seeing is believing. Like this is the conduct of those who resolve to treat the Almighty with dispassionateness, a judicial temper, clearheadedness and candour." (Newman, 1870: 330-331).

In Newman's novel, *Loss and Gain*, a priest reassures Charles Reding that one can attain moral certitude of the truths of the Catholic faith but that such certitude will not remove all intellectual difficulties. "Certainty," he said,

"in its highest sense, is the reward of those who, by an act of the will, and at the dictate of reason and prudence, embrace the truth when nature like a coward shrinks. You must make a venture; faith is a venture before a man becomes a Catholic; it is a gift after it. You approach the Church in the way of reason, you enter it in the light of the Spirit." (Newman, 1919: 385).

John Paul II echoed this insight in arguing that faith stirs the reason to overcome its isolation and to run risks in order to attain the truth.

Some critics suggest that this account of certitude inevitably leads to skepticism since it seems to dispense with external tests by which one might distinguish true and false convictions. Newman acknowledges the difficulty in arguing that

"in these provinces of inquiry each of us can speak only for himself, and for himself he has a right to speak. His own experiences are enough for himself, but he cannot speak for others; he cannot lay down the law; he can only bring his own experiences to the common stock of psychological facts. In this province, egotism is true modesty." (Newman, 1870: 300)

However, he goes on to say that

"he knows what has satisfied and satisfies himself; if it satisfies him it is likely to satisfy others; if, as he believes and is sure, it is true, it will approve itself to others also, for there is but one truth. And doubtless he does find in fact, that, allowing for the differences of minds and modes of speech, what convinces him, does convince others also. There will be very many exceptions, but these will admit of explanation. Great numbers of men refuse to inquire at all; they put the subject of religion aside altogether; others are not serious enough to care about questions of truth and duty and to entertain them; and to numbers, from their temper of mind, or the absence of doubt, or a dormant intellect, it does not occur to inquire why or what they believe; many though they tried, would not be able to do so in any satisfactory way." (Newman, 1870: 300-301).

So we should not be surprised that many will not accept our certitudes or that we will find conflicting accounts of religious belief for there are many reasons for this lack of acceptance. But the primary reason lies in the fact that “the fatal error of the world”: is “to think itself the judge of Religious Truth without preparation of the heart.” And he concludes his tenth university sermon by agreeing that rational proof is required for the claims of Christianity but that

“this proof need not be the subject of analysis, or take a methodical form, or be complete and symmetrical, in the believing mind; and that probability is its life. I do but say that it is antecedent probability that gives meaning to those arguments from facts which are commonly called the evidences of Revelation; that whereas mere probability proves nothing, mere facts persuade no one; that probability is to fact, as the soul to the body, that mere presumptions may have no force, but that mere facts have no warmth. A mutilated and defective evidence suffices for persuasion where the heart is alive; but dead evidences, however perfect, can but create a dead faith.” (Newman, 1839 a: 199-200).

Newman argued that the Catholic is never left in a state of subjective uncertainty even if his path to the truth is inherently personal and irreducible to formula. Even before becoming a Catholic, he had insisted that if God willed the salvation of the human race, he would not have revealed the Logos without supplying a providential authority which might secure its claims, thus overcoming that claustrophobic state of doubt or uncertainty about the truths of Revelation. He was aware that this authority was not to be found in the text of Scripture for reasons historical and theological but was to be found instead in a living voice capable of responding to, correcting, and applying the multitude of philosophical systems and human confusion to the deposit of faith. He argued that this authority had to be invested with a power equal to the depth of the danger it confronted in original sin which had enfeebled the operations of both the intellect and the will. Newman was struck by the fact that only one Christian body had consistently claimed to exercise such an authority. Many today argue that an authority of this magnitude is in itself oppressive and results in a corruption of the mind of the believer. But in a famous passage in the final chapter of the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* he argued that “It is the Catholic body itself, and it only, which affords an arena for both combatants [private judgment and ecclesial authority] in that awful, never-dying duel. It is necessary for the very life of religion, viewed in its large operations and its history, that the warfare should incessantly be carried on.” The Church is

“a vast assemblage of human beings with wilful intellects and wild passions, brought together into one by the beauty and Majesty of a Superhuman Power, into what may be called a large reformatory or training school, not as if into a hospital or into a prison, not in order to be sent to bed, or to be buried alive, but if I may change my metaphor, brought together as if into some moral factory, for the melting, refining, and moulding by an incessant, noisy process, of the raw material of human nature, so excellent, so dangerous, so capable of divine purposes.” (Newman, 1994: 225-226).

In concluding his treatment of the importance of Newman’s reflections on the relations of faith and reason, Nicholas Lash argued that

"if the *Grammar of Assent* speaks to us today as it did to its first readers, this is in no small measure due to its author's insistence that in matters of religious belief as in personal relationships and indeed in all concrete matters such security which is the fruit of costly personal engagement, rather than its precondition is in the last resort received as a gift. Thus it is that however shocking it may to those who prefer more compartmentalized patterns of reflection, the tone of Newman's phenomenological analysis is never far removed from the mood of prayer as in the surprisingly sudden reference to our need for the 'interposition of a Power greater than human teaching and human argument to make our beliefs true and our minds one.'" (Lash, 1979: 19)". ■

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