

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN'S
An Essay in Aid of
A Grammar of Assent

A Critical Guide

EDITED BY
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NEWMAN'S ILLATIVE SENSE RE-EXAMINED

LOGAN PAUL GAGE AND FREDERICK D. AQUINO

Introduction

Among John Henry Newman's contributions to epistemology, his notion of the "illative sense" may be both the most significant and yet the least understood. In this chapter, we seek to rectify this problem. First, we carefully lay out Newman's notion of the illative sense. Second, we discuss and evaluate three ways in which the illative sense might be understood in light of contemporary epistemology and psychology. Third, we create a model that attempts to fill out Newman's sketch of the illative sense. We close by answering two prominent objections to the illative sense in light of our model. If we are correct, the illative sense was not only an important innovation in epistemology in the nineteenth century but is also a defensible notion today.

The Illative Sense

Implicit and Explicit Modes of Reasoning

Newman includes the following quotation from St. Ambrose on the title page of the *Grammar of Assent*: "Non in dialectica complacuit Deo saluum facere populum suum" (It did not please God to save his people by means of logic).¹ This line captures a pervasive theme in Newman's conception of the modes, scope, and employment of the illative sense: namely, a shift of emphasis from

¹ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. Ian T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) (hereafter cited as *GA*).

“paper logic” (rationality reduced to formal logical arguments) to a broader account of how people reason in real-world environments.²

Newman accordingly thought it crucial to make a distinction between how the mind actually works and how we try to represent such activity. The former is logically prior to “investigation, argument, or proof;” the latter is “but the explicit form which the reasoning takes in the case of particular minds.”³ The activity of the mind can be compared to that of a skillful mountain climber:

The mind ranges to and fro, and spreads out, and advances forward with a quickness which has become a proverb, and a subtlety and versatility which baffle investigation. It passes on from point to point, gaining one by some indication; another on a probability; then availing itself of an association; then falling back on some received law; next seizing on testimony; then committing itself to some popular impression, or some inward instinct, or some obscure memory; and thus it makes progress not unlike a clamberer on a steep cliff, who, by quick eye, prompt hand, and firm foot, ascends how he knows not himself, by personal endowments and by practice, rather than by rule, leaving no track behind him, and unable to teach another. It is not too much to say that the stepping by which great geniuses scale the mountains of truth is as unsafe and precarious to men in general, as the assent of a skillful mountaineer up a literal crag. It is a way which they alone can take; and its justification lies in their success. And such mainly is the way in which all men, gifted or not gifted, commonly reason,—not by rule, but by an inward faculty.⁴

² See also John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua: Being a History of His Religious Opinions*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 155, where Newman cites the Ambrosian line with the comment, “And then I felt altogether the force of the maxim of St. Ambrose, ‘Non in dialecticâ complacuit Deo salvum facere populum suum;’—I had a great dislike of paper logic. For myself, it was not logic that carried me on; as well might one say that the quicksilver in the barometer changes the weather. It is the concrete being that reasons; pass a number of years, and I find my mind in a new place; how? the whole man moves; paper logic is but the record of it.” Paper logic, as Newman calls it, “gives us but the framework of the living workings of our minds, not the complete, intricate system of thoughts which underlie this verbal argumentation.” Zeno, *Our Way to Certitude: An Introduction to Newman’s Psychological Discovery: The Illative Sense and His “Grammar of Assent”* (Leiden: Brill, 1957), 4.

³ John Henry Newman, “Sermon 13: Implicit and Explicit Reason,” in *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford*, ed. James David Earnest and Gerard Tracey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 180 (hereafter cited in notes as *US*). As a result, he makes a distinction between reasoning and arguing—that is, between the spontaneous, tacit, and informal reasoning of the mind and the ability to capture this kind of reasoning through formal analysis.

⁴ *US*, 177.

This quotation anticipates Newman's account of the illative sense in the *Grammar* and his understanding of the convergent, though informal, nature of assessing and combining various pieces of evidence. In this respect, he construes reasoning in broader terms and sees it "primarily as a human function that operates naturally, rather than according to rule; it is 'a living spontaneous energy within us, not an art,' whose validity is not dependent on its reduction to syllogistic form."⁵ However, when the "mind reflects upon itself, it begins to be dissatisfied with the absence of order and method in the exercise, and attempts to analyze the various processes which take place during it, to refer one to another, and to discover the main principles on which they are conducted."⁶

The point, then, is that the activity of the mind is richer and subtler than the kind of reflexive activity in an explicit mode of reasoning; the assemblage of evidential considerations is not reducible to reflexive analysis. This distinction can be illustrated in the difference between

the more simple faculties and operations of the mind, and that process of analyzing and describing them, which takes place upon reflection. We not only feel, and think, and reason, but we know that we feel, and think, and reason: not only know, but can inspect and ascertain our thoughts, feelings, and reasonings: not only ascertain, but describe.⁷

Newman here acknowledges the importance of reflexive activity. We reflect upon our "mind as if it were some external object" and thus "reason upon" our "reasonings."⁸ However, such activity does not exhaust the operation of the mind, nor is it a prerequisite to being rational.

The illative sense accordingly is a "reasoning faculty"⁹ that has both unreflective

⁵ Geertjan Zuidwegt, "Richard Whately," in *The Oxford Handbook of John Henry Newman*, ed. Frederick D. Aquino and Benjamin J. King (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2018), 213.

⁶ *US*, 177; cf., *GA*, 232.

⁷ *US*, 176.

⁸ *US*, 176; cf. *GA*, 190.

⁹ Newman says the illative sense is the mode in which we ordinarily reason, dealing with things directly, and as they stand, one by one, in the concrete, with an intrinsic and personal power, not a conscious adoption of an artificial instrument or expedient; and it is especially exemplified both in uneducated men, and in men of genius,—in those who know nothing of intellectual aids and rules, and in those who care nothing for them,—in those who are either without or above mental discipline. As true poetry is a spontaneous outpouring of thought, and therefore belongs to rude as well as to gifted minds, whereas no one becomes a poet merely by the canons of criticism, so this unscientific reasoning, being sometimes a natural, uncultivated faculty, sometimes approaching to a gift, sometimes an acquired habit and second nature, has a higher

(or automatic) and reflective aspects (GA, 233).¹⁰ The former combines phenomena without full awareness of how things obtain or without explicit investigation (“perception of facts without assignable media of perceiving” [GA, 216]). That is, this “process of reasoning is more or less implicit, and without the direct and full advertence of the mind exercising it” (GA, 190). As an implicit mode of reasoning, the mind is not fully aware of all the relevant factors, states, and conditions that justify those beliefs and aptly form those judgments.

However, this automatic belief-forming process is subject to further reflection and refinement, especially when the aim is to decipher how these beliefs fit together in light of one another and whether they can be reflectively endorsed. This is precisely where the reflexive aspect of the illative sense enters the discussion. Newman here thinks that some factors (e.g., grounds, reasons, motivational states, and conditions) are accessible to the person on this level. The reflective aspect of the illative sense, as a result of training and the cultivation of complex assent, deciphers how various pieces of data fit together in light of one another. The cognizer, from a first-person point of view, reflectively investigates whether the grounds of particular beliefs are valid, whether they can be overthrown by sufficient reasons, and whether they fit within a larger circle of knowledge and understanding. This kind of cognitive activity stems from maturation of the illative sense, which comes through experience, practice, and guidance from exemplars of cultivated judgment.

source than logical rule,—“nascitur, non fit.” When it is characterized by precision, subtlety, promptitude, and truth, it is of course a gift and a rarity: in ordinary minds it is biassed and degraded by prejudice, passion, and self-interest; but still, after all, this divination comes by nature, and belongs to all of us in a measure, to women more than to men, hitting or missing, as the case may be, but with a success on the whole sufficient to show that there is a method in it, though it be implicit. (GA, 214)

¹⁰ In a letter to William Froude (April 29, 1879), Newman says that “there is a faculty in the mind which I think I have called the inductive sense, which, when properly cultivated and used, answers to Aristotle’s *φρόνησις*, its province being, not virtue, but the ‘inquisitio veri,’ which decides for us, beyond any technical rules, when, how, etc. to pass from inference to assent, and when and under what circumstances, etc. etc. not.” John Henry Newman, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 29:115 (hereafter cited in notes as LD).

In 1853, Newman described it as “partly a natural endowment common to all, or a special gift to certain persons, partly the result of experience; and it varies in its worth and preciousness, and its rarity, with the subject matter on which it is employed. Accordingly it has different names, and kinds; sometimes it is sagacity, sometimes common sense, strong sense, shrewdness, acuteness, penetration.” Hugh M. De Achaval, J. Derek Holmes, and Charles Stephen Dessain, eds., *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 24 (hereafter cited in notes as TP).

The Nature and Scope of the Illative Sense

As William Abraham points out, judgment is “inescapable in philosophy.”¹¹ For example, judgment plays a crucial role in weighing various pieces of evidence, in seeing the interrelatedness of diverse considerations, and in determining which of these considerations are significant and relevant to the issue at hand (e.g., making cumulative case arguments for religious beliefs). Yet, he argues that such an acknowledgement stands in the face of a real philosophical “temptation to reduce complex issues to a manageable form that can be settled by some kind of calculus.”¹² Notwithstanding this temptation, the appeal to judgment is not to some personal feeling or some “new kind of evidence which somehow adds extra weight to the whole.” Instead, the emphasis is placed on how “the evidence is recognized and weighed in the scales of rational evaluation, but not constrained by or reducible to ‘some sort of formal calculus.’”¹³ Or, in Newman’s terms, this “power of judging and concluding, when in its perfection, I call the Illative Sense” (GA, 227–28).

In several places in the *Grammar*, Newman calls the illative sense a “ratiocinative faculty,” “the reasoning faculty,” an “acquired habit,” a “higher logic,” a “living organon,” a “personal gift,” “supra-logical judgment,” “*judicium prudentis viri*” (the judgment of a wise person), the “architectonic faculty,” “*phronesis*,” or (noted above) the “power of judging and concluding, when in its perfection,” and that which determines the “limit of converging probabilities” (GA, 196, 205, 213, 214, 221, 223, 227ff., 233). As a result, for Newman the illative sense does not make irrational leaps in the dark but reason-based judgments. In fact, he speaks of “right judgment in ratiocination” (GA, 221). Thus, the illative sense does not “supersede the logical form of inference, but is one and the same with it; only it is no longer an abstraction, but carried out into the realities of life” (GA, 189–90). Newman’s distinction between *having* reasons and *giving* reasons “suggests that he saw the necessity of some kind of justifying inference.”¹⁴ The kind of “supra-logical judgment” of the illative sense that provides the “warrant for our certitude” is not, then, “mere common sense, but the true healthy action

¹¹ William J. Abraham, “The Existence of God,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 30.

¹² Abraham, “The Existence of God,” 30.

¹³ William J. Abraham, “Cumulative Case Arguments for Christian Theism,” in *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essays in Honour of Basil Mitchell*, ed. William J. Abraham and Stephen W. Holtzer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 34; see also William Alston, “The Distinctiveness of the Epistemology of Religious Belief,” in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. Godehard Brüntrup and Ronald K. Tacelli (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1999), 246; and GA, 204.

¹⁴ M. Jamie Ferreira, *Doubt and Religious Commitment: The Role of the Will in Newman’s Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 42.

of our ratiocinative powers, an action more subtle and more comprehensive than the mere appreciation of a syllogistic argument.”¹⁵

The illative sense, according to Newman, is a natural human faculty. It is not some secret, spiritual sense that is added to our nature but rather a native endowment just like memory, sense perception, and so on. Though a natural (or basic) aspect of our cognitive existence, the illative sense needs to be trained, developed, and perfected. In this respect, Newman envisions the perfection of the illative sense as the fulfillment of a sacred epistemic duty. As beings of “progress,” we enter the world with “nothing realized,” and so we must develop our “*natural inheritance*” by a reliable exercise or proper employment of our cognitive faculties (GA, 225; emphasis ours).

The illative sense, for Newman, is comparable to Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis*. However, its activity is not restricted to the moral realm; rather, it plays a role in the pursuit of truth in all fields of knowledge.¹⁶ Notwithstanding its broader range of activity than *phronesis*, the illative sense is domain specific and person relative. It is not a “general instrument of knowledge, but has its province, or is what may be called departmental” (GA, 219). The proportionate kind of right judgment in reasoning in a particular field of knowledge depends on the level of sagacity, skill, or prudence cultivated by a person. Such variance reveals that proper cultivation of this reasoning faculty requires a certain level of experience and practice in a specific field. However, the cultivation of judgment in a particular field of knowledge does not necessarily mean that one is equally equipped in or suited to another field.

Rather, in any concrete field of knowledge, we reason “as far indeed as we can, by the logic of the language, but we are obliged to supplement it by the more subtle and elastic logic of thought” (GA, 281). This is where the illative sense factors into the material nature of reasoning. Assessing the quality of an inference in a particular field of knowledge requires cultivation of the illative sense.¹⁷

Finally, Newman indicates that the illative sense operates “in the beginning, middle, and end of all verbal discussion and inquiry, and in every step of the process” (GA, 233). That is, the illative sense is involved in assessing prior probabilities, assembling the evidence, and evaluating the direction and force of the overall evidence.¹⁸ Even via such fallible means, Newman maintains that

¹⁵ Newman also says that the illative sense is “a grand word for a common thing” (LD, 26:375).

¹⁶ See LD, 29:115.

¹⁷ It must be remembered that this is a personal action. “The sole and final judgment on the validity of an inference in concrete matter is committed to the personal action of the ratiocinative faculty, the perfection or virtue of which I have called the Illative Sense” (GA, 223).

¹⁸ See William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 58; cf. Jay Newman, *The Mental Philosophy of John Henry Newman* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986),

certitude can result from “an *assemblage* of concurring and converging probabilities”—a certitude that “might equal in measure and strength the certitude which was created by the strictest scientific demonstration.”¹⁹ In the end, Newman insists that we need the illative sense because real-world, concrete reasoning is complicated. We need a way to gather and assess “probabilities too fine to avail separately, too subtle and circuitous to be convertible into syllogisms, too numerous and various for such conversion even were they convertible” (GA, 187).

The Illative Sense and Contemporary Epistemology

Newman's provocative account of the illative sense appears fruitful for further consideration in epistemology. There are three ways in which the illative sense either has been or is likely to be read by contemporary philosophers. However, we will argue that all three readings fail to do full justice to the illative sense.

First, some religious epistemologists will see parallels between Newman's illative sense and Alvin Plantinga's Reformed epistemology.²⁰ Plantinga proposes that God has designed humans with a *sensus divinitatis*, or a design plan according to which we form theistic beliefs upon having certain experiences (e.g., upon seeing a delicate flower or a starry sky). No discursive reasoning or complicated Aristotelian proofs are necessary, Plantinga maintains, for holding warranted theistic beliefs; it suffices that we should function according to our design plan in the correct environment.²¹ In many cases of warranted belief (including warranted theistic belief) the subject may not be able to form any arguments

167. M. Jamie Ferreira, *Scepticism and Reasonable Doubt: The British Naturalist Tradition in Wilkins, Hume, Reid and Newman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 177, says that the determination of converging probabilities is the crowning achievement of the illative sense.

¹⁹ John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 20. On Newman's commitment to fallibilism, see Frederick D. Aquino and Logan Paul Gage, “Newman the Fallibilist,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (2023): 29–47.

²⁰ See, e.g., Stephen Grimm, “Cardinal Newman, Reformed Epistemologist?,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (2001): 497–522; Tyler Dalton McNabb and Michael Devito, “St. Newman: Plantingian or Pritchardian?,” in *John Henry Newman and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Frederick D. Aquino and Joe Milburn (Routledge, forthcoming); Gregory Stacey, “Towards a Catholic Epistemology” (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2019), 201–52.

²¹ More specifically, *S*'s belief that *P* has warrant if and only if:

1. *S*'s belief that *P* results from the proper functioning of *S*'s cognitive system in a suitable environment;
2. the segment of *S*'s system that produced the belief that *P* is aimed at the truth; and
3. the overall system usually produces true beliefs when it is in a suitable environment.

for the belief from their evidence. In this respect, Newman's illative sense—a process that is largely opaque to the subject—may sound Plantingian.

Importantly, however, Plantinga maintains that the connections between experience and belief are causal connections: the starry skies don't so much provide evidence of a Creator as automatically "trigger" belief in the subject.²² On Plantinga's model, it is not required that the content of the triggering experience (input) bear any necessary evidential or rational relation to the content of the attendant belief (output).²³ Newman, however, clearly states that the illative sense provides a kind of "proof"—just not a formal proof (GA, 223). It would have hardly sufficed for Newman to have replied to the rationalist challenge to religious belief from the logician Richard Whately and his skeptical friend William Froude with an abandonment of the need for evidence. From his earliest works, Newman was repulsed by special pleading for religious belief and pointed out the parity between religious and nonreligious reasoning and certitudes.²⁴ For Newman, the illative sense is much more "subtle" than verbal or formal argumentation (GA, 232). It attends to more details and lines of evidence than a formal proof ever could. Hence, unlike Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis*, Newman's illative sense is sensitive to evidential connections. It is not a mere input–output mechanism but a delicate human organ of thought (GA, 187).

A second possible reading of the illative sense is to see it as part of a two-tier knowledge structure. In recent years, such a knowledge structure has been made famous by Ernest Sosa. Sosa proposes a distinction between animal knowledge and reflective knowledge.²⁵ On the one hand, the idea is that a great deal of our knowledge falls in the lower tier of animal knowledge. This animal knowledge is simply reliably formed true belief; one need not be aware of one's reasons for belief or evidence at all. Reflective knowledge, on the other hand, involves a second-order, reflective awareness that one has attained a reliably formed true belief. Thus, it may sound to some modern readers as if Newman thinks that the illative sense can produce this unreflective, instinctual, animal knowledge

²² Plantinga's proper-function account of warrant is a further refinement of Alvin Goldman's reliabilism about justification (which was, in turn, a refinement of Goldman's earlier causal account of knowledge).

²³ For a critique of this view, see Logan Paul Gage, "Objectivity and Subjectivity in Epistemology: A Defense of the Phenomenal Conception of Evidence" (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2014), 66–110.

²⁴ For a look at this parity argument, see Frederick D. Aquino and Logan Paul Gage, "Newman and Quasi-Fideism: A Reply to Duncan Pritchard," *Heythrop Journal* 64, no. 5 (2023): 695–706.

²⁵ Ernest Sosa, *Reflective Knowledge: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2:135–53. See also Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1:34, 43, 98, 113.

automatically, and formal reasoning, in which one is aware of one's reasons, produces reflective knowledge.

While plausible at first glance, we find such a reading unconvincing. For one thing, Newman is interested in defending religious belief as rational—not merely (or even primarily) as reliably formed. Moreover, Newman's illative sense is at the heart of his account of certitude. That is, far from constituting the faculty that produces lower-level knowledge, the illative sense is responsible for the highest achievement of certitude of which the human mind is capable. Far from having second-order awareness of our reasons or reasoning processes, oftentimes the illative sense produces conviction from so much evidence that we are incapable of holding all of these reasons before our minds at once. Fortunately, awareness of our reasons or evidence comes in degrees, and we are typically able to recount some of the reasons for the certitudes produced by the illative sense.

Third, some may see a similarity between Newman's formal and informal (illative sense) reasoning and the dual-process theories of cognition currently popular in cognitive psychology. As Daniel Kahneman has made famous, many psychologists believe there is a difference between the fast thinking of System One and the slow thinking of System Two.²⁶ Hence, it might seem as if Newman is suggesting a lower-level system that processes information quickly and informally and a higher-level system that reasons slowly and formally.

However, an incorporation of the illative sense into this contemporary schema would be flawed for the same reasons we've already seen. For one thing, System One is typically envisioned by dual-process theorists as involving the older, "lizard" brain.²⁷ The idea is that in order to survive, organisms developed quick, instinctual response systems to quickly process information and spit out (often rash) judgments. Notice again, however, that this would reduce the illative sense to a mere stimulus response system. Yet, for Newman it is a rational faculty able to quickly process a host of rational connections.²⁸ For

²⁶ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). NB: the key feature of all theories of System One is that System One is *autonomous* (i.e., used without deliberate control). See Alina Beary, "Dual Process Theory: A Philosophical Review," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 96, no. 2 (2022): 327–28.

²⁷ This claim goes back to the origin of the System One and System Two terminology. See Keith E. Stanovich, *Who Is Rational? Studies of Individual Differences in Reasoning* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998). One criticism of such dual-process theories is that System One processes are not always located in the evolutionarily old parts of the brain. See Jonathan St. B. T. Evans, "The Heuristic-Analytic Theory of Reasoning: Extension and Evaluation," *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review* 13, no. 3 (2006): 378–95. Because it isn't clear that there really are two separate systems, many thinkers today use the nomenclature of "type one" and "type two" instead.

²⁸ That Newman intends the illative sense to be cognitive is confirmed by his analogy to *phronesis*. The illative sense is a faculty of judgment, not mere instinctive reactions. See Ferreira, *Scepticism and Reasonable Doubt*, 175–76.

another thing, as seen previously, the illative sense helps us reach the heights of human knowledge. Far from being basic and reptilian, it is a subtle instrument of rational thought. So, the nonrational lizard brain (i.e., the emotional, instinctual response system that often sounds less than fully cognitive)²⁹ of the dual-process theorists hardly maps onto the deeply rational illative sense, even if the latter is able to operate quickly and its workings are often opaque to us. For Newman, both implicit and explicit reasoning are rational.³⁰ In fact, for Newman, implicit and explicit reasoning seem to belong to one power: the power of reason. The illative sense operates implicitly but also throughout the reasoning process (GA, 233). In this way, he may fit more naturally with single-process theorists than dual-process theorists.³¹

In sum, each of these readings fails to do justice to Newman's illative sense, and for the same reason. Namely, all three contemporary models are insensitive to the need for normative or rational connections between our evidence and our beliefs. Newman must be taken on his own terms.³²

The Illative Sense: A Model

We suggest that we can best interpret the illative sense as perceiving support relations unconsciously, or at least without full conscious awareness. The illative sense, then, picks up on rational support relations and helps us believe in a

²⁹ Newman would wonder why System One is viewed as feeling-centered *rather than* cognitive; why not both? If the reason for seeing system one as noncognitive is that it relies heavily on emotion and works quickly, both of these are compatible with the implicit and informal reasoning of the illative sense. On Newman and the emotions, see Frederick D. Aquino and Logan Paul Gage, "On the Epistemic Role of Our Passional Nature," *Newman Studies Journal* 17 (2020): 41–58.

Note too that Newman thinks that "informal reasoning is the 'tacit dimension' in all reasoning." Ferreira, *Scepticism and Reasonable Doubt*, 204. That is, it isn't just that System One is rational but, Newman would add, it is that System Two necessarily involves implicit assumptions. So, if to be rational is to always be explicit, then System Two isn't even rational.

³⁰ As Ferreira points out, while Reid strongly contrasted intuition and reason, Newman instead posited two modes of reasoning: implicit and explicit. Ferreira, *Scepticism and Reasonable Doubt*, 176, 178. See also *US*, 13.

³¹ Note too that dual-process theories seem at odds with a great deal of Christian anthropology in seeing rationality as additive (i.e., something added to brute animal powers) rather transformative (i.e., something where the higher transforms even the lower powers). See Candice Vogler, "The Intellectual Animal," *New Blackfriars* 100, no. 1090 (2019): 663–76.

³² A further reason not to assimilate Newman to contemporary psychological models is, of course, the replication crisis that empirical psychology is currently facing. See Bradford J. Wiggins and Cody D. Christopherson, "The Replication Crisis in Psychology: An Overview for Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology," *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 39, no. 4 (2019): 202–17.

rationally supported direction rather than merely causing us to believe things via causal relations. We do not intend to advance any particular view of the support relation, since this would be to go far beyond Newman. However, it could be that we perceive support relations between evidence and propositions via a direct acquaintance with the support relation (à la Fumerton) or via our ability to perceive the increased explanatory value of the proposition given the evidence (à la Poston).³³ Regardless, we take it as a datum that we do have the ability to perceive support relations and that this often happens with little to no conscious awareness. Newman's genius is simply to help us recognize what rationalists have obscured: reasoning takes place both explicitly and implicitly.

This is not some strange feature of Newman's epistemology but something we must all admit. For example, it frequently happens that one quickly comes to believe that a spouse or roommate is home right upon entering the door. If asked why we believe this, we can often recount some features of the room that led us to this belief (the presence of keys, purses, shoes, certain smells, etc.) even though we had little to no conscious awareness of these facts supporting our conclusion at the time we formed the belief. Cognitive psychologists speak of the "automaticity" of such processes of belief formation but now tend to recognize that automaticity and awareness come in degrees.³⁴

Instances of highly developed skills also showcase our ability to quickly perceive support relations. In their discussion of this topic, Blake McAllister and Trent Dougherty mention the interesting case of Norwegian chess grandmaster Magnus Carlson. When asked how he chooses which move to make, Carlson replied:

³³ See Richard Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995); and Ted Poston, *Reason and Explanation: A Defense of Explanatory Coherentism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). The standard account of evidential support, of course, is that evidence E supports a proposition P if and only if E increases the likelihood that P is true.

³⁴ Take, for instance, the literature on habits. While some accounts of habits have assumed that habits are fully automatic, there is an increasing recognition that so-called "automatic" habits actually exhibit a wide range of conscious awareness and intention. For a discussion, see Brandon Dahm and Matthew Breuninger, "Virtue and the Psychology of Habit," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 96, no. 2 (2022): 291–315. Even within a single action, only some parts are automatic. For further argumentation that many of our thoughts and actions are a mixture of automatic and controlled, see also Matt Stichter, *The Skillfulness of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 28–29; Daniel Kahneman and Avishai Henik, "Perceptual Organization and Attention," in *Perceptual Organization*, ed. Michael Kubovy and James R. Pomerantz (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017); and Gordon D. Logan and William B. Cowan, "On the Ability to Inhibit Thought and Action: A Theory of an Act of Control," *Psychological Review* 91, no. 3 (1984): 295–327.

Most of the time, I know what to do. I don't have to figure it out. I don't have to sit there [and] calculate for 45 minutes, an hour to know what the right move [is]. Usually I can just feel it immediately. . . . I have to, you know, verify my opinion, see that I haven't missed anything. But a lot of the time it's fairly useless because I know what I'm going to do, and then I sit there for a long time and I do what I immediately wanted to do.³⁵

Notice that this case is not well explained by the simple emotional and instinctive System One response of the dual-process theorists. Carlson's success would be mysterious if this sort of response were the cause. Instead, he is clearly picking up on relations of support between the positions of the pieces and a proposition about which move is best. Similarly, expert musicians report knowing almost instantly the quality of a vocalist or instrumentalist on their first hearing.³⁶

So, both in ordinary cases and cases of skill we see our ability to quickly and subconsciously or semi-consciously recognize relations of support from many pieces of data. This is how we understand the role of the illative sense. It is able to perceive innumerable relations of support and help us believe in their direction (*GA*, 189). Newman would add that we only tend to reason formally in philosophy seminars, formal debates, public disputations, and the like. We should not confuse this for our ordinary mode of reasoning. "Paper logic," as he sometimes called it, has its place.³⁷ But formal reasoning often attenuates or mutilates our actual evidence for purposes of argumentation.³⁸ In ordinary cases, the illative sense's informal reasoning is how "the mind progresses in concrete matter, viz. from merely probable antecedents to the sufficient proof of a fact or a truth, and, after the proof, to an act of certitude about it" (*GA*, 213). The ordinary way in which we achieve certitude in everyday life about the fact that we're going to die or that Great Britain is an island is via the mind's ability to perceive innumerable support relations and believe in the supported propositions. This process is fallible, but, of course, so is human reason.

While Newman's account doesn't give us specifics, if we construe the illative sense as picking up on rational support relations, it is natural to think that this perception of support generates "seemings," or appearances. Hence, when you

³⁵ Blake McAllister and Trent Dougherty, "Reforming Reformed Epistemology: A New Take on the *Sensus Divinitatis*," *Religious Studies* 55, no. 4 (2019): 537–57. Note that while Carlson uses the language of feeling, he does not seem to treat this process as noncognitive but instead fleshes it out with the language of opinion and knowledge.

³⁶ Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), 246. Gladwell's book is full of examples of rapid cognition in which we quickly perceive support relations.

³⁷ See Newman, *Apologia*, 155.

³⁸ *US*, 159–60.

open the door to your apartment, it simply seems to you as if your roommate is home. When Carlson observes his opponent's move, it almost instantly seems to him that he must move his knight. Or when you hear a certain tone of voice, it instantly seems to you that your spouse is angry. Moreover, the strength of the seeming tends to correspond to the strength of the support relations perceived. The more evidence one picks up on that one's roommate is home, the more clearly it seems that the roommate is, in fact, home. This correspondence between the number and strength of support relations and the strength of one's seeming helps us make sense of the link Newman draws between the illative sense and certitude. Even when fallibly is evidenced, the support for a given proposition (like "one day I will die") can be overwhelmingly clear.³⁹

Newman consistently sought to avoid special pleading for religion and saw a deep parity between religious and nonreligious reasoning.⁴⁰ The illative sense is not a special religious faculty to make up for a lack of evidential support for theism. Instead, here is how we think Newman would construe theistic belief.⁴¹ From an early age, one has an awareness of the moral law through their experience of conscience. In conscience, we sense that we have trespassed not just an abstract *principle* but feel as though we have offended *someone*.⁴² We do not commonly reason this explicitly (e.g., "I sense a moral obligation; and if I sense a moral obligation, then God exists; ergo, God exists"). But we do pick up on the relation of support between our awareness of having trespassed against someone and the existence of an all-good being that we have offended; and so, it may instantly seem to us as if God exists. Similar things happen to ordinary human beings when we perceive great beauty, order, and harmony in nature: it just instantly seems to us that God exists. Given Newman's illative sense, this is plausibly construed as us becoming aware of support relations between the beauty, order, and harmony of nature and the existence of God as the source of these things.

Furthermore, this model makes sense of why believers are not so bothered when they encounter various technical objections to theism: they have tacitly perceived so much support for God's existence—from the beauty, order, and harmony of nature; from the moral law; from the contingent nature of the

³⁹ For a discussion of Newman's fallibilism, see Aquino and Gage, "Newman the Fallibilist."

⁴⁰ See esp. *US*, sermon 11.

⁴¹ For Newman's argument from conscience, see the *GA*, chap. 5. See also Logan Paul Gage, "Newman's Argument from Conscience: Why He Needs Paley and Natural Theology After All," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 94 (2020): 141–57.

⁴² For a further reflection upon the social and relational nature of obligation, see Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), chaps. 10–11; and C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 2.

cosmos; from religious experience; from the value and purpose of human life, and the like—that it strongly seems to them that God exists. On this model, this can be as fully rational as the freshman college student who keeps believing firmly in the existence of the external world despite reading Descartes's *Meditations* for the first time. She has so much evidence in support of the material world that the dream argument doesn't bother her. In both religious and nonreligious instances, then, we plausibly have large-scale, cumulative cases built up from (at least tacitly) perceived support relations. Ordinary people grasp support relations from various facts about the world, conversations, books, and experiences. This generates a strong seeming that God exists and, in usual cases, we believe in the direction of how things seem to us with a proportional strength.

Given the disparate and numerous lines of evidence that bear on such propositions as "God exists" or "an external world exists," it is hardly surprising that we are not typically able to articulate all our reasons for belief when challenged. It seems an unreasonable rationalist requirement that we do so in the religious case when we can hardly do so in ordinary cases such as believing that Great Britain is an island. Moreover, the literature on expertise reveals that it is uncommon even among experts to be able to communicate the processes underlying their expert achievements:

[Hubert] Dreyfus [who developed the Dreyfus model of the stages of expertise] explicitly argues against any articulation requirement for expertise: "Rationalists say that one must be able to articulate the principles underlying any rational decision. We say, not unless you build it into your definition of rational."⁴³

When experts are asked to explain why they do what they do, they often fall back on, "Because it works."⁴⁴ In our view, it is easy to see how such cumulative cases build up to an appropriate certitude like that which Newman proposes. Such certitude can often be fitting, given the broad base of evidence we have

⁴³ Stichter, *Skillfulness of Virtue*, 50. Stichter agrees with Dreyfus about many things, but he insists that Dreyfus "underestimates the role of deliberative processes in skill acquisition and performance" (50). Stichter points to research saying that experts have trouble articulating why they do what they do and indicating that rational control is used alongside automatic processes (you self-regulate as automatic processes go astray or as new features of a situation arise). These processes are not wholly automatic, even if many feel like less effort is required. This fits well with the Newman-inspired model we've developed here, where perceiving rational support takes little to no conscious effort, but clearly much is happening beneath the surface.

⁴⁴ Stichter, *Skillfulness of Virtue*, 56.

for many claims and our skillful illative sense that is able to tacitly recognize rational evidential connections.⁴⁵

Objections

With Newman's understanding of the illative sense made clear, as well as our own proposed model, we now wish to address two longstanding objections to Newman. Jay Newman worries that "illative reasoners cannot show that those who disagree with them are in an epistemically inferior position" and thus that perhaps peer disagreement gives illative reasoners an undercutting defeater.⁴⁶ That is, given that others who are equally smart and competent disagree with us about religious matters, should this fact not serve to undermine our confidence that we are right and they are wrong? We see two objections here: First, isn't the illative sense useless for justifying beliefs if we can't reproduce our reasoning for others? Without the ability to share all our reasoning with others, isn't the illative sense just a blind insistence we are right and others wrong? Second, even if we could appeal to the illative sense to justify our beliefs, can't others do the same? Wouldn't we then be in a peer disagreement stalemate? If so, this would seem to counteract any initial justification we received via the illative sense.

⁴⁵ Is the account sketched here an inferential or non-inferential account of belief formation? It depends on what is meant by "inferential." If "inferential" simply means having a further rational basis, then of course this is an inferential account, since on this account beliefs are based upon appropriate seemings that are, in turn, based upon tacitly perceived support relations. (By "appropriate" we mean that the content of the seeming matches the content of the belief, as when it seems to one that there is a tree and one believes that there is a tree.) On the other hand, if "inferential" means that one consciously runs through the support for one's belief in a sort of argument, then this account is non-inferential.

For a helpful discussion of inference and the subconscious, see Trent Dougherty, "Principles of Inferential Justification," in *Intellectual Assurance: Essays on Traditional Epistemic Internalism*, ed. Brett Coppenger and Michael Bergmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 127–43. Dougherty argues that inference is not something we do so much as something that happens to us in the normal course of our thought lives. This is highly congruent with Newman, who writes: "But what logic cannot do, *my own living personal reasoning*, my good sense, which is the healthy condition of such personal reasoning, but which cannot adequately express itself in words, *does for me*, and I am possessed with the most precise, absolute, masterful certitude of my dying some day or other" (GA, 195, emphasis added).

⁴⁶ Jay Newman, "Cardinal Newman's Factory-Girl Argument," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 46 (1972): 71–77. Cf. Jay Newman, *The Mental Philosophy of John Henry Newman*, 151–55, 198.

The Articulation Problem

With regard to the first objection, note that we have immediate justification all the time without being able to explain our full evidence and reasoning to others. Take a man who, seeing a tree right in front of him, believes in its presence. It is no objection to immediate justification in such a case that he cannot articulate how the process of vision works in terms of wavelengths, optics, and brain processes or that he can't articulate exactly how trees differ from other large plants. He need not be able to fully defend his evidence and processes to the tree skeptic. If we don't allow appearances to immediately justify beliefs, at least *prima facie*, we shall all end up skeptics about the material world and similar fundamental issues.⁴⁷

In ordinary cases, people clearly have rational grounds for all manner of propositions because they tacitly picked up on many support relations—even if they can't articulate them. In ordinary cases, we can often articulate *some* of our reasons, though perhaps not always. Our reading of Newman's illative sense makes sense in light of his goal of showing how ordinary believers can be justified regardless of their inability to mount sophisticated arguments. If this were a requirement of rationality, we'd have to be skeptics about numerous beliefs. So we think Newman is clearly operating with a conservative—that is, an innocent-until-proven-guilty—epistemic principle.⁴⁸ We form many beliefs every day via the implicit grasping of support relations, and if this process isn't typically reliable, we're in big trouble. So the religious skeptic needs a special reason to deny that such implicit reasoning works in religious matters.

One big advantage of Newman's account of the illative sense (and the way in which our model fills it out) is that there is no need to posit any special religious faculty like the *sensus divinitatis*. Instead, religious belief is generated by the normal workings of processes of which we are already aware. As mentioned previously, Newman was allergic to special pleading for theistic beliefs and saw a deep parallel between religious reasoning and our ordinary modes of reasoning. For him, faith is a kind of reasoning upon prior assumptions, just

⁴⁷ For an argument that we ought to initially extend the benefit of the doubt to everything that seems true to us, see Logan Paul Gage and Blake McAllister, "The Phenomenal Conservative Approach to Religious Epistemology," in *Debating Christian Religious Epistemology: Five Views on the Knowledge of God*, ed. John M. DePoe and Tyler Dalton McNabb (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 61–81.

⁴⁸ On the history of this tradition from Carneades (in the second century BC) to Thomas Reid (in the eighteenth century) to Roderick Chisholm and Michael Huemer in our own time, see Roderick M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966); Gage, "Objectivity and Subjectivity in Epistemology," chap. 4; and Blake McAllister, "Re-Evaluating Reid's Response to Skepticism," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (2016): 317–39.

like all ordinary reasoning.⁴⁹ Far from endorsing any sort of fideism, Newman maintained that believers have evidence; it is just “personal evidence.”⁵⁰ And we maintain that such personal evidence is what we have in many ordinary cases of implicit reasoning. Furthermore, this process of implicit reasoning could work in both theistic and specifically Christian belief. Alvin Plantinga’s model not only calls for special religious faculties, but he has to invoke two such faculties or unique processes: the *sensus divinitatis* to form theistic beliefs and the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit to produce specifically Christian beliefs. As a Catholic, Newman is, of course, committed to the special action of the Holy Spirit in leading us to faith. However, faith involves an exercise of reason as well, and Newman’s view has the advantage of not invoking special religious faculties to perform this reasoning.⁵¹

The Disagreement Problem

Recall now Jay Newman’s second criticism. He worries that everyone can appeal to their illative sense. Where, then, does that leave us? Doesn’t the presence of smart and well-informed people who use their illative sense yet still disagree with us cancel out our own justification via our illative sense? That is, even if we grant that the grasping of support relations can generate good reasons to believe, these reasons would seem to be counteracted by the existence of reasonable peer disagreement.

While we feel the force of the objection, Newman’s account of the illative sense clarifies and helps address the problem of peer disagreement. First, while on many models peer disagreement is a surprise, on Newman’s view, we should *expect* disagreement. People have varying backgrounds and prior commitments, and thus they assimilate information differently. This is perfectly appropriate. Disagreement isn’t a bug; it’s a feature of his account. Newman would add, however, that because of these different starting points and prior assumptions, we must be careful about the notion of “peers” used by contemporary epistemologists. Reasoning about concrete matters of fact is deeply personal for Newman. Because of this, as Nathan King has put it, “a good peer is hard to find.”⁵² Considering the many background factors that affect the information

⁴⁹ *US*, 165.

⁵⁰ *TP*, 84–86.

⁵¹ *US*, 147. We would add that, while we ordinarily pick up on support relations tacitly, the Holy Spirit may help focus our minds or help us attend to or notice support relations already present, as well as give us the grace to relent in our resistance to God and believe.

⁵² Nathan L. King, “Disagreement: What’s the Problem? or A Good Peer Is Hard to Find,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85, no. 2 (2012): 249–72. Cf. Logan Paul Gage, “Evidence and What We Make of It,” *Southwest Philosophy Review* 30, no. 2 (2014): 89–99.

we pay attention to, how the information gets interpreted, etc., we should not too quickly assume that others are working with the exact same evidence we possess. As Newman writes:

And, as this man or that will receive his own impression of one and the same person, and judge differently from others about his countenance, its expression, its moral significance, its physical contour and complexion, so an intellectual question may strike two minds very differently, may awaken in them distinct associations, may be invested by them in contrary characteristics, and lead them to opposite conclusions;—and so, again, a body of proof, or a line of argument, may produce a distinct, nay, a dissimilar effect, as addressed to one or to the other. (*GA*, 196)

We might add that we should expect such disagreement in both formal and informal reasoning.

Second, Newman would say that the illative sense must be honed since it is a fallible faculty. In fact, there's no guarantee that one has used the illative sense in a given instance, let alone that it worked perfectly. It is always possible that wishful thinking or another nonrational process was at work. Yet, even if one uses her illative sense and uses it perfectly, she might have idiosyncratic, misleading, or even crazy evidence that leads her to a false conclusion. The second way in which Newman's model helps with peer disagreement is his insistence that there is more than just information processing at work (as on overly computational theories of mind).

Newman maintains that there is a kind of *judgment* operative with the illative sense (*GA*, 221). These judgments are deeply personal. For one thing, they are like a skill that needs to be honed in different domains. The illative sense is a general power, but our judgment in particular areas must be sharpened with practice.⁵³ His examples of such informal inferences at work are of judgments in the physical sciences, courts of law, and literary disputes (*GA*, 209–13), as well as historical and theological judgments (*GA*, 234–47). Reasonable peer disagreement seems especially likely in matters calling for such fine and delicate judgments as scholarly disputes. For another thing, these deeply personal judgments often bear on our character (e.g., our good and bad desires). Newman takes seriously Jesus's words, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8). We all know how self-interested we can be; our

⁵³ See Frederick D. Aquino, *Communities of Informed Judgment: Newman's Illative Sense and Accounts of Rationality* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), esp. chaps. 3–4.

judgments aren't always impartial. And so, disagreement regarding matters of, say, good and evil is not only to be expected because of our different priors but because of our different characters.

Third, and finally, we believe that Newman would not rest content with showing that there are often rational bases for our disagreements. Newman does not intend an appeal to the illative sense to be the end of the matter. We can, of course, dialogue and try to find equilibrium. In normal cases, we should expect that we are able to articulate at least *some* of the reasons on which the illative sense based its judgment. If one finds that she can't reproduce any good reasons at all—or at least if she can't do so over time—she needs to re-evaluate her position. (These highly artificial peer disagreement scenarios in which we are not allowed any space to think or time to reflect and then decide how to accommodate new evidence are spurious.)

As mentioned earlier, Newman would be quick to add that it is hardly surprising that we can't reproduce our reasons given how numerous, complicated, and implicit such reasons are. But our inability to satisfy extreme skeptics in religious matters is no proof of irrationality given the parallel to satisfying skeptics in other areas. In fact, this is where we believe Newman can be incredibly insightful regarding the problem of peer disagreement. He recognizes that we have reasons we cannot always articulate. As Newman puts it, "All men have a reason, but not all men can give a reason."⁵⁴ Acquiring reasons does not automatically entail the ability to articulate these reasons, let alone to articulate them to others' satisfaction. Newman helpfully separates the context of justification from the dialectical context. I can be justified without being able to show *you* that I am justified. If demonstration is not the only—or even the usual—path to knowledge, this is to be expected.⁵⁵ Appeals to the illative sense could be abused to cover up a lack of reasons, of course, but this need not be so.

Peer disagreement therefore poses a *possible* undercutting defeater—something that defeats the belief generated by the illative sense—but not necessarily. It depends on the extent to which we are able to examine ourselves and see whether or not we have at least some reasons. Typically, disagreement spurs us to do more research (to discuss with others, etc.) on important things to see if the initial judgment of the illative sense was correct. But that does not show that we were not justified in the first place. It might only show that we have received new evidence or meta-evidence (i.e., evidence about our evidence) in the form of peer disagreement, and now we need to

⁵⁴ *US*, 178.

⁵⁵ Newman famously rejects John Locke's "pretentious axiom that probable reasoning can never lead to certitude" (*GA*, 106). Human beings regularly assent, and even assent with certitude, to propositions on "evidence short of intuition and demonstration" (*GA*, 116–17).

check into things more explicitly. This is akin to the case of the expert chess player mentioned earlier who has a quick, intuitive judgment that is surely justified but then, given the importance of every single move, takes the time to double-check his initial judgment. Newman thinks that often the occasion or need never arises for such explicit reasoning and investigation. As he says, we go with the judgments of the illative sense until antecedent probabilities (i.e., prior expectations) fail us.⁵⁶

Conclusion

To sum up, we began by detailing Newman's understanding of the illative sense before discussing three ways in which the illative sense could be read in light of contemporary epistemology and psychology. We then tried to cash out Newman's notion of the informal reasoning of the illative sense in terms of our ability to quickly and tacitly perceive support relations. This model allows Newman to maintain that this process is based upon rational evidential connections rather than a mere causal process.

We closed by considering two objections from Jay Newman. In reply to his worry that if we can't show others we are justified then we must not be justified, we argued that such a requirement would undermine all kinds of immediate justification and thus end in skepticism. This is too demanding. Further, we attempted to show that, far from running up against the problem of peer disagreement, John Henry Newman's illative sense helps us make sense of disagreement.

In particular, Newman has the resources to question the standard account of peers given in the literature, since in his view we bring our whole selves to our judgments. Newman would also note that, far from being mere mechanical operations based upon information downloads, these judgments can be honed in particular domains. Lastly, Newman would note that the illative sense does not leave us in epistemic silos. We can still dialogue with others and check to see if we can tease out at least some of our implicit reasons. But our inability to fully articulate these reasons or to convince others doesn't mean that the judgments of the illative sense were initially unjustified. Still, our judgments are revisable over time if we cannot make explicit any (or a sufficient amount) of our reasons or if we receive new information defeating our initial judgments.

We conclude that Newman's notion of the illative sense is incredibly fruitful when put into dialogue with the best of contemporary epistemology. It also promises to rescue us from rationalist epistemologies, both secular and religious.

⁵⁶ *US*, 135.