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NEWMAN AND THE 'ETHICS OF BELIEF'

The last thirty years have seen a number of major contributions to the philosophical discussion of the possibility and character of an 'ethics of belief'. In so far as the concern was focused on the problem of what constitutes 'sufficient' or 'insufficient evidence', the question of the 'ethics of belief' has turned into the current philosophical preoccupation with the question of the character of 'rationality' and the possibility of criteria of rationality which are either universal or at least cross-contextual. On the other hand, in so far as the concern was focused on the debated thesis that 'believing is subject to moral appraisal (including the determination of "duties" to believe)', the question of the 'ethics of belief' is with us today as the double inquiry into the question of the 'will to believe' and the relation of belief to action. Though the two concerns are not entirely separable, I will pay more explicit attention in this paper to the latter one in assessing some recent claims concerning the position held by John Henry Newman on these matters. After addressing some of the main points in the modern philosophical discussion of the 'ethics of belief', I will attempt to clarify Newman's place in the 'ethics of belief' discussion and argue that recent evaluations of Newman misrepresent his position in crucial ways and obscure his contributions to that discussion.

Before looking at Newman's place in the discussion of the 'ethics of belief', it will be helpful to review (very sketchily at least) some of the main points that can be abstracted from the modern literature on the topic.¹ The two questions addressed are whether the ascription of moral terms to injunctions about belief makes any sense, and whether (if it does make sense) there are in fact any applications or cases where such ascription is legitimate. These questions imply the preliminary question (if 'ought implies can') of the *description* of the mechanism of believing, in terms of the descriptive relation between willing and believing. (The general consensus is that whether believing is susceptible to moral assessment at all will depend on whether it is descriptively sufficiently like those categories, like 'action', which are

¹ The following are some of the most useful explicit discussions: H. H. Price, 'Belief and Will', *PASS* (1954); C. K. Grant, 'Belief and Action' (Durham, 1960); Robert Ammerman, 'Ethics and Belief', *PAS* (1965); Van Harvey, 'Is There an Ethics of Belief?', *JR* (1969); Bernard Williams, 'Deciding to Believe', *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge, 1973); Peter Kauber and Peter Hare, 'The Right and Duty to Will to Believe', *Can. Jour. Phil.* (1974); J. A. Passmore, 'Hume and the Ethics of Belief', *David Hume: Bicentenary Papers*, ed. G. P. Morice (Edinburgh, 1977); Louis Pojman, 'Belief and Will', *Rel. Stud.* (1978; unpubl. revis. 1980); Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford, 1981). Page citations in the body of the text concerning any of these authors will refer to these particular articles.

unproblematically subject to moral appraisal.) The thesis, then, under consideration, is whether ‘believing, understood in ways restricted by the descriptive possibilities, is subject to moral appraisal, including the determination of “duties” to believe’.

Two distinctions have become standard in the discussion. The first is the distinction between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ willing to believe: ‘direct volitionalism’ is the thesis that believing is, at times at least, directly and immediately under our control (by a sort of intellectual *fiat*); ‘indirect volitionalism’ is the thesis that indirectly, and over time, by employing certain techniques (selective focusing, etc.) we can cause ourselves to have a particular belief. The second distinction concerns the form of the injunction being considered – that is, ‘You ought to believe *p* (particular proposition)’ *vs.* ‘You ought to believe in a responsible manner (a general policy toward believing)’.

In terms of these preliminary distinctions we can already make a point about ‘ethics of belief’ discussions in general. Traditionally ‘ethics of belief’ positions have been attributed to people like Locke, Clifford, and Russell. Locke’s ‘lover of truth’, like Russell’s, ‘regulates’ his assurance in accord with the evidence; Hume’s ‘wise man proportions his belief to the evidence’.¹ Clifford’s vehement prohibition against ever believing anything on ‘insufficient evidence’ is in the same tradition.² What should be noted is that talk of regulating or proportioning assent or assurance to evidence can only consistently be held in one of the following combinations. On the one hand, one can consistently combine such talk with a view of belief/assent as ‘free’ or ‘active’ in some sense, in relation to evidence which does not compel us in spite of ourselves. On the other hand, one can consistently combine an injunction to ‘regulate’ our beliefs with a view of belief/assent as a totally passive phenomenon, compelled by the evidence, *as long as* one restricts the injunction to the kind of obligation which can be fulfilled either by the adoption of a general policy of cultivating only rational beliefs, or by indirect willing to believe *p*. Thus ‘ethics of belief’ language only escapes contradiction with a view of belief as passive if the requisite qualifications concerning the object of the ‘regulation’ are made; one might, for example, want to argue that (some of) the observed tension between the two tendencies in Hume’s thought might be reconciled in this way.

The majority consensus in the contemporary discussion is that while direct willing to believe *p* is conceptually ‘impossible’ or at least, odd (for various reasons which we will consider later), indirect willing to believe *p* is possible, and so the language of ‘ethics of belief’ at least makes sense in this case. A suitable candidate for moral appraisal, therefore, is said to be the *action* of

¹ Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV, xvi, 1; Russell’s *A History of Western Philosophy* (N.Y., 1945), p. 816; Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ‘On Miracles’.

² W. K. Clifford, ‘The Ethics of Belief’, *Contemporary Review* (1877).

'trying to believe p '.¹ Another suitable candidate is said to be the *action* of adopting a policy of trying to believe only rational beliefs.

The question of whether such language is ever applicable in fact yields a greater difference of opinion with respect to the form of injunction. A strong case has been made that given the relation between moral action-duties and the beliefs which may be their 'enabling' conditions, there can be duties to try to believe particular propositions.² Some who hold this, however, explicitly deny that there can ever be a duty to adopt a *general* policy concerning the ideal of responsible believing.³ In this they clearly contradict those who argue that there can be a duty to adopt such a general policy, both because of the relation between true beliefs and the moral good of free, rational action, and because of the importance of the notion of 'habit' or 'skill' with respect to truth-seeking.⁴

One more formal point can be made about the general notion of an 'ethics of belief'. The traditional accounts classed as 'ethics of belief' positions clearly have *prescriptive*, rather than merely descriptive, concerns about believing. So would any account which employed concepts of 'responsibility' for believing, and the existence of 'duties' to believe. But one might wonder whether the presence of ethical categories and prescriptive concerns is a sufficient, as well as a necessary, condition for the ascription of the term 'ethics of belief' to a given programme. Traditional historical accounts have judged several other conditions to be necessary. For example, they have argued that belief must be based on 'evidence' rather than based on relation to other moral ends or goods. However difficult it is to delimit the notion of 'evidence', there is at least a clear distinction between a belief's being based on arguments and being based on the goal of, say, maintaining family harmony. Clifford, for one, seems committed to a claim that the moral good of evidentially-determined truth outweighs any other moral good. Bernard Williams and Louis Pojman are contemporary examples of this concern with 'truth-centred motives' for believing. What should be noted here is that the possibility of believing for non-truth-centred motives shows that the language of 'duty' and 'responsibility' does not in itself transform an account into a traditional 'ethics of belief' account.

Such traditional accounts have, moreover, also had a third requirement, for they agreed that not only must assent be based on evidence, but it must be exactly proportioned to the evidence. An understanding of assent as 'free' therefore brings in ethical categories, but can be seen as threatening to an 'ethics of belief' position because it can in principle imply a view in which the relation between assent and evidence is totally unconstrained.

¹ The outstanding exception is H. H. Price, who sees the obligation as 'prudential' rather than 'moral'.

² Cf. Ammerman, Kauber and Hare; Pojman and Swinburne (e.g. 100) (and perhaps Grant) in special cases.

³ Ammerman and Grant.

⁴ Harvey, Pojman and Swinburne (e.g. 73 ff.).

In sum, understandings of belief which emphasize responsibility for the belief, as well as the existence of ‘duties’, can in principle go directly against traditional ‘ethics of belief’ accounts (even though they clearly have some ‘ethics of belief’) precisely because of the possibility that freedom might imply arbitrariness and that duty might be tied to ends other than truth-centred motives. Whatever way one’s intuitions go on the question of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the ascription of the term ‘ethics of belief’ to an account, it should be clear that there is the possibility of ethics of belief which differ in kind and not merely in degree.

One understanding of belief which has strong prescriptive concerns (as opposed to merely descriptive) and uses the ethical language of ‘responsibility’ and ‘duty’ is that offered by John Henry Newman. Newman’s account has been used recently as an example of the voluntarist extreme of the spectrum, placing him in the company of people like Descartes and Kierkegaard. Pojman, in both ‘Belief and Will’ and the revised version ‘Volitionalism and the Nature of Belief’, sees Newman as a ‘strong volitionalist’ and cites the following remarks by Newman as warrant:

Assent is an act of the mind, congenial to its nature; and it, as other acts, may be made both when it ought to be made, and when it ought not. It is a free act, a personal act for which the doer is responsible.¹

J. A. Passmore also cites the final sentence of that quotation – assent is a ‘free act, a personal act for which the doer is responsible’ – in support of his similar contention that Newman belongs on the side of the unqualified voluntarist like Descartes and Kierkegaard, rather than even with the intermediate voluntarist position of Aquinas (78). Others have either explicitly or implicitly adopted a similar view of Newman.

The precise intent of such claims is difficult to determine because they are made in a general way – neither in terms of the distinction between direct and indirect volitionalism, nor in terms of the distinction between the injunction to believe particular propositions and the injunction to adopt a general policy toward believing. Moreover, although Pojman himself makes a further (idiosyncratic) distinction which equates ‘prescriptive volitionalism’ with the view ‘that it is permissible to treat beliefs instrumentally’ (27*, 10), his reference to Newman does not make fully clear which position he is attributing to Newman. If Newman’s claim that assent is a ‘free’ act is meant to support the charge that Newman was a prescriptive volitionalist (i.e. one who advocates believing on non-truth-centred motives), I can only refer the reader to my treatment of Newman’s views on the necessity of rational justification of beliefs.² The reference to a ‘free’ act, however, suggests that

¹ The reference is to Newman’s *Grammar of Assent*, p. 232 (standard edition), and is found on p. 2 of the 1978 article and p. 1 of the unpublished revised version (1980). In what follows references followed by an asterisk will be to the revised version.

² *Doubt and Religious Commitment: The Role of the Will in Newman’s Thought* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 480–3 and *passim*.

of the two remaining alternatives – direct and indirect volitionalism – Newman is probably being judged to be a direct volitionalist, one who thinks we can ‘obtain beliefs directly simply by willing to do so’ (7*, 9). (Such a charge, if by chance not Pojman’s, is a common enough one.) In what follows I will attempt to clarify Newman’s location in the ‘ethics of belief’ discussion by arguing that such roles of the will as Newman did see as possible and legitimate do not entail direct volitionalism. Moreover, the kind of deliberate volitionalism which does occur in his account illuminates the question, raised again most recently by Richard Swinburne, of the character of ‘rational tenacity’ in the face of negative evidence.

Let me begin with some of Newman’s thought-provoking (to say the least) comments on assent and will. He writes that

upon an inference of whatever kind there is a natural spontaneous act of the mind towards it of acceptance or the reverse, which I have above expressed under the word Assent, and said to be under the jurisdiction of the will... [C]ertainty, which though it naturally follows upon conviction, is a making up the mind that a thing is true which is proved, and therefore is under the control of the will; that is, the will may suppress, extinguish the feeling.¹

Moreover, though ‘assent is a free act’, yet the ‘voluntary does not enter into assents, for our assents often, as sensation, precede any act of will, thus “a is a” we are obliged to assent to...’ (*T.P.*, 130). Certitude, he writes, is ‘a free act (to speak generally), just as the acts of conscience are free and depend upon our will... [and] when it is a duty to be certain, one must do one’s best to fulfil the duty...’ (*T.P.*, 121).

This is the kind of material which obviously does much to aid and abet direct volitionalist interpretations of Newman, but it just as obviously is material which has two messages to convey: one is that assent is ‘spontaneous’; the other is that it is ‘under the jurisdiction of the will’. One cannot simply ignore the emphasis found in Newman’s thought on spontaneous acceptance/rejection and then isolate, thus out of context, claims about control of the will and ‘free’ acts. Newman’s intentions concerning the meaning of the ‘free’ act of assent can be fairly determined only in the context of the whole picture of his thought, and moreover, only by taking particular account of the kind of intellectual opponent he saw himself facing. As is the case with many others as well, what Newman was affirming can often best be seen by close inspection of the kind of thing he was wanting desperately to deny. I suggest, therefore, that Newman’s claims about assent be interpreted in a way which tries to do justice both to notions of spontaneity and control of will, and to the kind of model Newman was attacking.

¹ *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Faith and Certainty* (1846–86), ed. Achaval and Holmes (Oxford, 1976), pp. 14–15 (1853). Further references to this collection in the text will take the form: *T.P.*, —.

First, what model was Newman attacking? A beginning can be made by looking at some striking quotations on certitude. Newman wrote:

Certitude is *not a passive impression made upon the mind from without*, by argumentative compulsion, but in all concrete questions (nay, even in abstract, for though the reasoning is abstract, the mind which judges of it is concrete) it is *an active recognition* of propositions as true, such as it is the duty of each individual himself to exercise at the bidding of reason, and, when reason forbids, to withhold. (*Grammar of Assent*, 344–45, emphasis mine)

That is, the admission that p is certain is not a ‘passive impression’ due to ‘argumentative compulsion’ but is rather, because the mind is ‘concrete’, an ‘active recognition’. He reiterates: certitude is ‘not the passive admission of a conclusion as necessary’; it is not ‘the compulsory effect of any process of argument as its proper cause’ (*T.P.* 126, 121). Such passages suggest that Newman was at great pains to deny the ‘passive’ character of certitude (certain belief).

The passive status of belief in general, however, is precisely what Williams, Pojman and others are at equal pains to affirm. For Pojman, belief is not an act, but an event or a ‘happening’ (7*, 4). Beliefs happen to us – in much the way colds and headaches happen to us – they are ‘passive’ and come ‘automatically’ (8*, 9*, 7). In this he follows H. H. Price, who thinks that deciding-that- p is ‘not a free choice at all, but a forced one’ (16). He also amplifies Bernard Williams’s suggestion that because of the conceptual link between belief and the aim of truth-seeking, belief can only be something that happens to us (147–8); more precisely Pojman suggests that even if possible, it is conceptually odd to think of belief as the result of willing, because one must at the same time get oneself to think that one believes it because it is true and not because one willed to believe it (12–13*). Richard Swinburne offers a similar argument against direct volitionalism; in a section entitled ‘Belief is Involuntary’ he writes:

If I chose at will to believe that I now see a table, than I would realize that this belief originated from my will and so had no connection with whether or not there was a table there, and so I would know that I had no reason for trusting my belief, and so I would not really believe. (25)

While I think Williams, Pojman, Price and Swinburne are right to argue against the conceptual possibility of directly creating belief by intellectual *fiat*, I object to what seems their implicit proposal: namely, that all beliefs are of the same status, and that we either see belief as ‘forced/passive’ or are committed to direct volitionalism. Are such alternatives exhaustive?

I suggest that Newman’s reference to an ‘active recognition’ is effectively part of his attempt to expose a false dichotomy (for most of our evidentially

based beliefs) between 'forced/passive' and 'created directly by *fiat*'. The recognition is *active* because conclusions are not reached, Newman says

by a scientific necessity independent of ourselves, – but by the action of our own minds, by our own individual perception of the truth in question, under a sense of duty to those conclusions and with an intellectual conscientiousness. (*Grammar*, 318)

Newman is here highlighting the impotence of any supposed intrinsic necessity in the evidence; it cannot compel us by a necessity independent of ourselves since our minds are 'concrete' – already clothed, as it were, with what he elsewhere calls 'antecedent assumptions'.

Newman is thus pointing to the limits of the *formal* demands of evidence in much the same way that Hilary Putnam has recently and impressively pointed to them. Putnam writes:

Today, a host of negative results, . . . have indicated that there *cannot* be a completely *formal* inductive logic. . . . [T]here is always a need for judgements of 'reasonableness', whether these are built in via the choice of vocabulary . . . or however. Today, virtually no one believes that there is a purely formal scientific method.¹

Rationality, says Putnam, has an irreducibly 'informal' element, which cannot be schematized formally. Judgments of 'reasonableness' are necessary, and they depend on 'prior probability functions' or attributions (Newman's antecedent assumptions). There is no way to formalize the 'reasonable' prior probability functions; in fact, he writes:

[T]here does not seem to be any good reason to think that there would be a set of rules which could distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable priors [prior probability functions] and which would be any simpler than a complete description of the total psychology of an ideally rational human being. (192)

My suggestion then is that we read part of what Newman means by the 'free' act of assent in terms of both the category of 'active' and the category of 'concrete' (as opposed to a passive impression made on the mind solely by the independent and formal demands of the evidence). Newman's view of the 'free' act of assent thus fits in-between the view of belief as coerced and the view of belief as an arbitrary choice. To repeat, for most of our beliefs for which there is evidence to be assessed, it is simply not the case that the only alternatives are (1) a direct intellectual creative *fiat* and (2) an automatic, involuntary, passive reflex.

Pojman observes

I don't come to a conclusion on the basis of any willing to believe one way or the other but because the complex factors in the situation incline me one way or the other. One of these factors may be my wants and wishes influencing my belief, but once the belief comes it comes as produced by the evidence and not as an outcome of a choice. (10*)

¹ *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 125.

The contrast here between being produced by the evidence and being produced by a choice assumes that anyone who talks about a decision or choice or free act thereby allows the choice to be *rightly* unconstrained by the evidence. But such language needn't imply that. A 'free' act or choice is necessarily an arbitrary choice only if one implicitly assumes an analytic paradigm of reasoning as the sole model of intellectual sanctity. To the model of analytic compulsion and passive impressions Newman opposes the model of the concrete mind reasoning, with its antecedent assumptions and its personal appraisal. Newman's objection is to *impersonal compulsion* – this does not preclude an affirmation of *rational constraint* (and we find such an affirmation in Newman's work).

Moreover, the contrast between being produced by the evidence and being produced by a choice seems to suggest that any decision-that-*p* is something that comes temporally 'after' the deliberation. Newman's decision-that-*p*, however, is a 'spontaneous' acceptance or rejection. I take that to mean that for Newman the assent is not distinct from the reasoning process in the sense of something which we *then* attach to it. Newman's claim that reasons do not exhaustively account for the assent is meant to indicate the role of personal (concrete, active) appropriation, not to suggest that the assent is another act, *after* the appraisal. The recognition is active precisely because it is not separate from the reasoning process which is active and personal. The recognition of the force of the evidence is not something that comes *after* the appraisal, but *is* the appraisal carried to its conclusion or culmination *by the concretely reasoning agent*.¹ To say, as Pojman does, that the assent is passive and automatic, even though it might come after personal and active deliberation, is to artificially separate the process from its culmination in a way I think would seem foreign to Newman (and so causes Newman's claims to be misunderstood).

There is, however, one important way in which Newman did see a role for an act of will, a free choice, *following* the intellectual appraisal, but it was not an act of will to create a belief. We noted earlier the standard distinction between direct and indirect willing to believe. In addition to direct creation of belief, which I have just tried to show Newman neither thought possible nor advocated, and indirect creation of beliefs (which I see no reason to think he would deny), Newman emphasized what seems to be another role of the will. Rather than direct or indirect creation, it seems to be a role in which the will effects a commitment to or confirmation of an already-experienced belief.

Even if we are *rationally constrained by our deliberate, active personal appropriation of the evidence*, it is still possible for us to choose to undermine the certainty we have experienced. Newman notes this when he says that 'the

¹ Cf. *Grammar*, 229 and *Doubt and Religious Commitment* (note 9), pp. 44, 54–7, 72.

will may suppress, extinguish the feeling' of certainty; this is by way of explaining what he had just meant by saying that certainty is 'under the control of the will'. He continues: 'The will, then, though it cannot create <force> certainty, can stifle it' (*T.P.*, 15). What we can do to certainty, we can do to assent as well, and this provides another sense to Newman's claim that assent is a 'free' act – it is not 'against' our will; we could undermine it after having experienced it.

We can stifle or extinguish an already-experienced certitude for a variety of reasons. We can, for example, be tempted to undermine our certainty of those beliefs which make demands on us (i.e. those beliefs whose consequences are morally 'costly' – e.g. *Grammar*, 213). For Newman a realistic appreciation of our moral weakness gives us both a need and a right to *confirm* the certitudes we have reached in our careful attempt to learn the truth. This deliberate commitment to our certitudes can also be legitimated, for Newman, because of our own intellectual weakness. We can be intellectually unstable or paranoid: Newman writes that 'the state of mental certainty depends ultimately on the will' because 'the will could so act upon the mind as to lead it morbidly to make that microscopic objection [that the evidence was not logically demonstrative] an occasion of doubt'.¹ Some kinds of temperaments (or all of us some of the time) are inclined to such intellectual neurosis. Certainty is thus under the control of the will both because we can choose to stifle it and because we can choose to confirm it (commit ourselves to it). Not only can we undermine our own certitudes without reason, but we can because of moral weakness or intellectual timidity also allow our certitudes to be undermined by others without sufficient warrant. Therefore, a deliberate act of will by way of commitment to the certitude can both affirm the constraint of the evidence and not be superfluous.

Newman's argument seems to be that because we know we can stifle certitudes (and let them be stifled) when nothing in the evidence warrants that change, we may have a right and even a duty to commit ourselves to them. This argument would resemble the lines (noted earlier) of the argument that when beliefs are the 'enabling' conditions of our moral duties, we have a right and a duty to cultivate them by indirect willing. A 'duty to be certain', therefore, might refer to a duty to commit ourselves to a certitude we've experienced, and it might be legitimated by the appropriate sort of connection between the certitude and the performance of our other duties.

It is, however, notoriously difficult to draw the line between those things that unreasonably or unwarrantedly tempt you against being 'true to the truth', and those things that you ought to let count against your certainty. This committing role of the will, therefore, seems to open the way to an

¹ *Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. C. S. Dessain et al. (London, 1961–8), xviii, 334 (24 April, 1858).

irrational or dogmatic tenacity in the face of negative evidence. Such a criticism of theoretical commitment has recently been offered by Richard Swinburne and a brief analysis of it can indicate another way in which Newman's account contributes to the clarity of the discussion.

Swinburne's starting-point is a claim made by Basil Mitchell that 'A man who is prepared to change his mind about any of his beliefs whenever it appears to him that the evidence tells against them will not be able to hold on to them long enough to work them out and test them properly.'¹ The problem with such a view, according to Swinburne, derives from the passive character of belief:

[B]elief is a passive matter; . . . you can only believe something if you believe that the evidence supports it. *If that is right, the only way in which you can save your belief in the face of negative evidence is by disguising from yourself the negative force of the evidence.* (97, emphasis mine)

If one disguises the negative force, however, one will never be able to see reasons for changing the belief – one will be fixed in it. Swinburne concludes, therefore, that since Mitchell allows that even religious beliefs are ultimately falsifiable, he cannot mean that one must disguise the negative force of evidence, and so he cannot mean that one has a right to a theoretical commitment to the belief as true. All Mitchell must mean, says Swinburne, for all that one can sensibly mean, is that 'people who are most of the time believers should hang on to the practice of religion, should act as if it was true (not, should *believe* it), on their off-days (when on balance the evidence seems to be against it)' (97).

In other words, Swinburne is arguing that 'in the face of negative evidence' we have only two options: 'disguising . . . the negative force of the evidence' or ceasing to believe. If that were true, then the kind of commitment to a belief as true (theoretical commitment, as opposed to the practical commitment to acting-as-if) which Newman endorses (and which Mitchell seemed to endorse) would be ruled out either descriptively or prescriptively. Such theoretical commitment would constitute a commitment either to doing the impossible – maintaining the belief in the face of negative evidence while admitting the negative force of the evidence – or to doing the illegitimate – maintaining the belief in the face of negative evidence by disguising the negative force of the evidence, and thus ensuring ultimate unfalsifiability. In what follows I want to suggest that Newman's account offers reason to challenge both the exhaustiveness of Swinburne's two options – disguising the negative force or ceasing to believe – and his prohibition against theoretical commitment as necessarily leading to ultimate unfalsifiability.

¹ Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, p. 97, cites this from Mitchell's *The Justification of Religious Belief* (N.Y., 1973), p. 130.

Swinburne's descriptive case against continuing to believe (and hence against committing oneself to continuing to believe) in the face of negative evidence begins with his discussion of the relation between belief and evidence early in the book. Consider, he says, a mother who admits that 'the public evidence seems to indicate that her son is dead' yet continues to believe he is alive. 'If she really continues to believe, she must believe either that the public evidence does not show what others think it shows (e.g. because there are hidden discrepancies in it) or that she has private evidence which counts the other way' (23). Swinburne's formula for the relation between belief and evidence, however flexible, 'rules out the suggestion that a man could believe a proposition while admitting that the public evidence rendered it improbable and denying that he had any other evidence' (23-4).

This latter formulation contains a number of ambiguities, but I want to focus on one, in the phrase 'the public evidence renders it improbable'. *What* is being rendered improbable? The proposition p ? But it strikes me that in some cases at least one can rightly admit that all the negative evidence even attempts to render improbable is one's particular configuration of justifying reasons for p . If so, that alone (even apart from the recognition that the denial that one 'had' or 'has' any other evidence is not equivalent to a denial that one could reasonably obtain other evidence) seems to offer some reason to challenge Swinburne's hard line. It seems that descriptively at least one could continue to believe p alongside the admission that the evidence thus far presented does render improbable one's present basis for believing p (and in that way renders p improbable). If so, one needn't either disguise the force of the negative evidence or cease believing.

Is such an appeal, though, to the theoretical distinction between one's present case and 'the evidence-as-such' a sensible one, with rational considerations in its favour, or is it simply a possible resort whose legitimation must depend on non-truth-centred motives (connection with moral duties, etc.)?

Warrant for both the descriptive possibility and the rational legitimacy of such continued belief in the face of negative evidence is suggested by Newman's general point that we often 'see better than we say'. Newman often argues for the difficulty of adequately analysing our grounds for believing, the difficulty of 'giving' our reasons. The mind, he writes, is

unequal to a complete analysis of the motives which carry it on to a particular conclusion, and is swayed and determined by a body of proof, which it recognizes only as a body, and not in its constituent parts. (*Grammar*, 292)

Like others after him, Newman held that all reasoning has something implicit about it.¹ The reasons laid out to justify the conclusions of genius are, often as not, beside the mark, and even when reasoning has gone on, the best of

¹ Most notably work by Michael Polanyi, Gilbert Harman and Putnam (note 11).

it is often too subtle and complex to be exhaustively or even accurately detailed (*Grammar*, 301, 330–2, 380). Newman's position on this is even cited approvingly by Swinburne:

The point that a man may be altogether rational in his acquisition of beliefs, acquire them only on good grounds, and yet be unable to set out those grounds, was made very forcibly by Newman. (39)

That Swinburne agrees is clear from his earlier remark that one needn't be able to state explicitly the inductive standards one uses: '[a] professional reasoner may be able to set out his reasons; but if a man cannot do that he may be guided by reasons all the same' (22).

It is, however, precisely this kind of admission which seems to me to render extreme any a priori prohibition against believing in the face of negative evidence (and hence against theoretical commitment). If we can admit that we can be guided by good reasons without being able to set them out; if we know a priori that our explicit case does not always correspond, either in adequacy or accuracy, to our implicit case, then it need not be unreasonable to continue to believe, at times, in the face of challenges to our explicit case, even those which render it 'on balance' improbable. One could allow, for example, that one's case had not been a good one, but better ones might reasonably be available; one could allow that one's case as rendered explicit was a poor attempt to do justice to the complex of converging probabilities that led to the conclusion. At the very least it seems to me that the difficulty of analysing grounds for belief allows one plausibly to claim that continued belief in the face of negative evidence is not always inappropriate, as Swinburne suggests it is.

This, admittedly, seems to open the 'thin edge of the wedge', a ploy which could be adopted *ad infinitum*, rendering the belief unfalsifiable in fact, if not in principle. But what can go to extremes need not. Swinburne is correct in noting that if we consistently 'disguise' the force of negative evidence, we will never be able to allow the belief to be falsified (97). But Swinburne's claim that intellectual tenacity can only be exercised by 'disguising' the force of negative evidence depends on the assumption that counter-evidence does or should only undermine belief 'by degrees'. Perhaps, however, the dichotomy – either disguise the negative force or alter the belief in a precise, rigid up/down correlation with alterations in evidence – is, once again, a false dichotomy. While it is obvious that disguised evidence cannot affect you, it is not obvious that evidence has to affect you by degrees in order to affect you at all. If it does not, then perhaps a particular kind of intellectual tenacity could be maintained along with the value of ultimate falsifiability. The model of tenacity required would have to be one in which the falsifying effect is registered in a kind of gestalt all-or-nothing shift. Is such a model plausible?

I suggest that Newman's model of reasoning in non-demonstrative cases

as a cumulative, converging, probabilistic process implies as its obverse just such a model of intellectual tenacity.¹ The nature of the process as reinforcing and converging (rather than linear and additive) can be thought similar to that found in other processes where nothing moves the scale at all until the mass reaches a 'critical threshold'. It's not that one is unaware of the evidence accumulating, but it registers its effect only when the pattern falls into place, as they say. If this account of how cases are made is plausible, and I think it is, then its obverse is a plausible account of how cases are unmade – a cumulative case in reverse, so to speak. Because counter-evidence needs to be assessed and put into perspective, it seems possible to take negative evidence seriously – not to close one's eyes to its possible effect – without thereby causing a piecemeal weakening of the belief. In such a case one needn't disguise the counter-evidence as it comes in, nor disguise that the case is, at a given time, 'on balance' improbable, for one to be able to continue to believe. And the denial that beliefs are or should be undermined by degrees is compatible with allowing for ultimate falsifiability because the denial of a particular kind of abandonment of belief (by degrees) is not the same as the denial of any kind of abandonment of belief.

Newman's account thus offers one plausible way of reconciling belief in the face of negative evidence with the possibility of ultimate falsifiability by precluding the need for 'disguising' the negative force of the evidence. What is true of continued belief seems applicable as well to a commitment to the belief as true: there can be truth-centred considerations and not merely practical considerations which warrant tenacity in the face of negative evidence. I suggest that this offers a plausible alternative to Swinburne's view of belief as passive, with its implication that the only rational commitment in the face of negative evidence is a practical commitment to acting-as-if; it is, moreover, a contribution to the clarity of the discussion concerning the 'will to believe' and the 'ethics of belief'.

¹ Especially in the *Grammar of Assent* and *Theological Papers*.