# BELIEF

by

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This thesis is my own work, and to the best of my knowledge all sources have been acknowledged.

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CONTENTS

"All that we can do by voluntary and conscious effort, in order to come to a conclusion, is, after all, only to supply complete materials for constructing the necessary premises. As soon as this is done, the conclusion forces itself upon us. Those conclusions which (it is supposed) may be accepted or avoided as we please, are not worth much."

HELMHOLTZ.

" ... wherever no hypothesis can be scientifically proved or disproved, and yet some hypothesis must be accepted as a starting-point for thought or as a basis for conduct, the individual is justified in selecting the hypothesis which yields the richest results in the discovery of truth or in the leading of a good life."

BEATRICE WEBB.

# INTRODUCTION

Clement of Alexandria remarks that 'not only the Platonists, but the Stoics, say that assent is in our power.' [1] In the opening chapters of Clement's Miscellanies, the voluntariness of faith is of crucial importance, for he maintains that if we have faith, God will then grant us knowledge of himself, and that it is only by faith that we can acquire this knowledge. He takes as literally true the words of the Prophet 'Except ye believe, neither shall ye understand.' Clement unfolds this cryptic statement: 'Faith, by a kind of divine mutual and reciprocal correspondence, becomes characterized by knowledge.' [2] Clement sees love or fear as the foundation of this voluntarily accepted faith, but clearly, from what has already been said, there may be at least one other motive - desire for knowledge of God. Furthermore, according to Clement, faith is the foundation of all knowledge. If anyone should hold that knowledge is founded on demonstration, he should be reminded, says Clement, that first principles are incapable of demonstration. [3]

Anyone who believes that philosophical positions are never refuted but only go out of fashion and come back again, will be encouraged to learn that William James virtually reproduces Clement's position in his article The Will to Believe. For James argues that we have a right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, and he suggests pretty strongly that evidence for the existence of God will only be forthcoming after we have believed. And to parallel Clement's point about demonstration it will be found that Hume's skeptical arguments make it appear that certain fundamental propositions cannot be justified, but only accepted.

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1 Clement of Alexandria. The Stromata, or Miscellanies ch. 12 from The Ante-Nicene Fathers. ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1962 P. 360.

2 Clement. Miscellanies ch. 4. op. cit. P. 350

3 ibid.

It will be seen that, in direct opposition to these views, both Locke and Hume think it absurd to assert that it is within our power to believe anything. Nevertheless, in recent years R.M. Chisholm has made famous the concept of the ethics of belief. He has contested the ethical point of view put by W.K. Clifford - 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence' - with the view that 'we may accept any proposition we would like to accept provided only that we do not have adequate evidence for its contradictory.' [4] Quite obviously, this implies that there is a very wide range of propositions that we are at liberty to believe. Chisholm is well aware of this, and argues that our believings are 'acts', since they are characterized by self-control, which, Chisholm argues, is the essence of activity. [5] But other contemporary philosophers, for example, Bernard Williams and Roy Edgley, argue that it is not even a contingent fact that we cannot choose to believe.

So it has long been the case, and is still the case, that what some philosophers have offered as a practical proposal, others have seen as a logical impossibility. In order to discover what sort of freedom we have to believe I shall investigate the writings of a succession of philosophers in the empiricist tradition to see what they say about this subject, and, more importantly, to determine whether or not positions they establish commit them to some sort of freedom to believe. As this examination of particular philosophers proceeds, points relevant to the voluntariness of belief suggest themselves, and I shall not hesitate to pursue them.

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[4] R.M. Chisholm, Perceiving, A Philosophical Study. Cornell University Press, 1957. P. 100.

[5] R.M. Chisholm, 'Lewis' Ethics of Belief' in The Philosophy of C.I. Lewis. ed. P.A. Schilpp Open Court, 1968. P. 224

Most of the philosophers selected here are not interested in the freedom to believe per se, or even in belief per se, but in judgment, which is one way of coming to believe. Now it is impossible to explicate Locke's theory of judgment without also explicating his theory of probability, which in turn makes it necessary to discuss his theory of testimony. In the philosophers studied here after Locke, only Hume had a developed theory of probability, and as that theory has received ample discussion in the literature, I have dealt with it quickly. But both Hume and Clifford have expounded views about testimony. Now testimony is a fundamental source of information right across the spectrum of human activities. In our everyday lives we rely on it for the news of the day. In our workaday lives we rely on it to learn what our colleagues are working on and what they have read or heard. Scientists rely on testimony to ascertain whether or not co-workers have made corroborating observations. Individuals outside the pale of religion must, if Clement and James are correct, rely on it to learn if those who believed before them were rewarded with evidence. Yet testimony is not well covered in the literature, so I have made the discussion of it, along with the discussion of the freedom to believe, the main theme of the thesis.

When the historical examination is complete, I list the conclusions arrived at and comment on them, and defend them against the arguments of contemporary philosophers. The final chapter is an independent discussion of testimony.

# CHAPTER 1 LOCKE

## 1. Sketch of Locke's Theory of Knowledge

In his introductory chapter of the fourth Book of the Essay Locke defines knowledge as "the perception of the connexion of and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas." [1] We should note here that Locke writes of the "connexion of and agreement ...." indicating that he has at least two sorts of relationship in mind. It is important to remember this when we read Locke, since many of the examples he gives of the sort of proposition that we can know are trivial or necessary, hence it is easy to drift into the false view that on Locke's showing entailment is the relation between ideas that provides us with knowledge. But when Locke means entailment he usually adds a word to the key terms of the above definition, expressing himself by the phrase "necessary agreement". For example in the same paragraph as the above definition Locke writes that we perceive "that equality to two right ones does necessarily agree to, and is inseparable from, the three angles of a triangle." What, then, is it to perceive that ideas simply agree or disagree?

The beginning of the answer to this question lies in the classification he gives of the kinds of agreements. He distinguishes four of these

1 Identity or diversity

2 Relation

3 Co-existence or necessary connexion

4 Real Existence. [2]

A perception of the first sort is the perception that an idea is what it is, and hence is different from any other idea. Perceptions of any relations between ideas fall under (2),

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[1] John Locke. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding Vol.2 Dover Edition. New York 1959. Book 4, Chapter 1, paragraph 2. (4.1.2. All references of this sort are to the Essay in the Dover Edition.)

[2] 4.1.3.

but Locke generally thinks of a special class, viz entailment, falling under this classification. By perception of co-existence or necessary connexion Locke means the perception that a quality is implied by one of the constellation of properties that, for us, constitute a substance. Locke does not include under (3) the perception of the qualities that constitute a substance. That would be a perception of real existence. Under (3) he is considering the perception that a quality of a substance implies the presence of another. He thinks that very few qualities have such implications:

> the simple ideas whereof our complex ideas of substances are made up are, for the most part, such as carry with them, in their own nature, no visible necessary connexion or inconsistency with any other simple ideas, whose co-existence with them we would inform ourselves about. 3

For this reason, he thinks that the knowledge of "inco-existence" [4] is "very narrow, and scarce any at all."[5]

The relations of agreement have so far been those of self-identity and entailment. The sort of agreement listed under (4) "is that of actual real existence agreeing to any idea." [6] Locke holds that we are able to perceive that real existence "agrees" or "conforms" to an idea - "that some ideas provide (us) with an evidence that puts us past doubting" [7] whether objects correspond to them. Is there not an obvious difference, he asks, between seeing the sun by day, and thinking of it at night, and smelling a rose and

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3 4.3.10.

4 4.3.12.

5 4.3.10. Evidently, Locke thinks that there is some knowledge to be had here. Examples that he gives of necessarily related qualities are "figure necessarily supposes extension, receiving or communicating motion by impulse supposes solidity." (4.3.14.) But the first of these is analytic, as is, very likely, the second. Locke says somewhere that solidity implies extension. This is a more promising contender. See 2.13.11.

6 4.1.7.

7 4.2.14.

thinking of the scent later?[8] The thesis is that ideas carry evidence of their real origin on their faces, so that we can see, by inspecting the ideas themselves, whether something is the case in the world beyond them.

However the objects of knowledge of real existence need further clarification. Does Locke think that we observe tables and windows and people, or that we only have ideas of these objects and know that something corresponds to them? Locke writes as though the first is his position. For example, he says that in order to "frame" our ideas of substances, what we must do is include in our ideas the observable properties of things.[9] But on Locke's account we never directly confront things, only the ideas of things. Can we be said to know then, the actual properties of things? Locke's reply to this is that we know when we are really observing something because the quality of what we observe when we really observe (e.g.) a fire is different from the quality of what we observe when we only imagine one. Reality "agrees" with the idea of the one and not with the other. Evidently, this kind of reply, employing as it does a representative theory of perception, encourages a skeptical response. However there is no need for us to pursue the sense in which Locke can be said to observe physical things given his representative theory of perception and his doctrine of the primary and secondary qualities. The point for us is that in Book 4 Locke writes as though knowledge of real existence is knowledge of what are today called observation statements. He writes:

> Thus seeing water at this instant, it is an unquestionable truth to me that water doth exist.[10]

And he writes when he is discussing probability, a context in which he does need to count observation statements as certain:

> If I myself see a man walk on the ice, it is past probability, it is knowledge.[11]

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[8] ibid.

[9] See 4.4.12.

[10] 4.11.11.

[11] 4.15.5.

I now return to consider Locke's definition of knowledge. The term "agree" is used there to allow for the relation of "conformity" between idea and thing. The words "connexion" and "repugnancy" occur in the definition because Locke uses the first to mean "logical connection," and the second to mean "logical incompatibility." What is crucial about knowledge, as Locke understands it, is that we are able to perceive, from the ideas themselves, that something is the case. The contrast he makes with belief is that in belief we are not able to perceive what is the case - we only "take it" [12] or "presume" [13] that something is the case.

> Judgment ... is the putting ideas together, or separating them from one another in the mind, when their certain agreement or disagreement is not perceived, but presumed to be so. 14

Most of us hold that we know what we observe, what we can deduce, what we feel, (I refer here to bodily feelings), what we remember, and some of us hold that we can observe ourselves just as immediately as we can a sensation. Locke agrees with us in that he thinks we know what we observe and deduce, and also that we can know what we feel, for feelings on his account are simple objects of intuition. Locke does not discuss how memory fits in with his definition, but as long as we "remember well", he says, "we have knowledge of the past existence of several things, whereof our senses have informed us." [15] And Locke maintains that we have a direct knowledge of our own existence.

> If I know I doubt, I have as certain perception of the existence of the thing doubting, as of that thought which I call doubt.... In every act of

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[12] 4.14.3.

[13] 4.14.4.

[14] 4.14.4. See also 4.15.3.

[15] 4.11.11.

> sensation, reasoning, or thinking, we are conscious to ourselves of our own being; and in this matter, come not short of the highest degree of certainty. 16

Unfortunately, Locke does not realize that this sort of knowledge is not accommodated for by his definition, for it does not involve any perception of ideas.

Locke joins with us, then, in holding that we know just what we think we know. But there is an important exception, later contested by Cardinal Newman. If we believe P on the ground of very strong testimony, and P is true, we say that we know that P. Thus if we believe, having heard it on the news, that the Queen Elizabeth was gutted by fire in Hong Kong harbour, we would claim to know that the Queen Elizabeth was gutted by fire in Hong Kong harbour. But Locke would not allow this, on the ground that we take the proposition to be true but do not perceive directly that it is true. He says of this sort of case:

> That which makes me believe, is something extraneous to the thing I believe; something not <u>evidently</u> joined on both sides to; and so not <u>manifestly showing</u> the agreement or disagreement of those ideas that are under consideration. 17

Locke has admitted as knowledge quite different sorts of propositions. We must now see what he makes of the difference. He says that there are "three degrees of knowledge, viz. intuitive, demonstrative, and sensitive: in each of which there are different degrees and ways of evidence and certainty." [18] The greatest degree of evidence attaches to the perception of what the ideas are themselves. It is evident that they are what they are, and that they differ from each other. But when we turn to demonstrations we find that some do not simply disclose entailments to our perception.

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[16] 4.9.3.

[17] 4.15.3. emphasis mine.

[18] 4.2.14.

"Pains and attention" are required if we are to perceive the connections. Locke remarks:

> It is true, the perception produced by demonstration is also very clear, yet it is often with a great abatement of that evident lustre and full assurance that always accompany that which I call the intuitive. [19]

Obviously, this is a true statement about some demonstrations as Locke's word "often" makes plain. And some demonstrations are completely perspicuous. But Locke does not want to restrict knowledge to those, otherwise certain very important proofs, such as those in "Mr. Newton's books," would be ushered out of the realm of the knowable. Locke does want to say that we can know even "long deductions" which employ "many proofs". [20] Locke says of perception, indicating its degree of certainty, that "it goes beyond bare probability" [21] though "it be not altogether so certain as our intuitive knowledge, or the deductions of our reason .... Yet it is an assurance that deserves the name of knowledge." [22]

What are we to make of this doctrine of the different degrees and ways of evidence and certainty? The doctrine of the different ways of certainty is unexceptionable. It is clear enough that there are different ways of becoming certain of propositions - we may perceive that they are true, or we may deduce them or intuit them. But the doctrine that there are different degrees of certainty is a strange one. If we are certain of Q, and less certain of P than of Q, isn't it the case that we have some doubt about P and are not fully assured of P? But Locke cannot put the matter this way, for if he does, it will turn out

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[19] 4.2.6.

[20] 4.2.7.

[21] 4.2.14.

[22] 4.11.3. Locke is inconsistent about how certain the certainty of the senses is. In 4.11.2 he says that the testimony of his eyes is the greatest assurance he can possibly have, but he takes that back in the next paragraph.

that we have some doubt about less perspicuous demonstrations, and since the evidence that reality "agrees" to our ideas is even more open to question, it seems that we ought to have still more doubt about perception. But if we have doubt about P, we cannot be said to know P. It is clear to Locke that intuition, demonstration and perception differ in the degree of evidence that they present to the mind, but he doesn't want to say that degrees of doubt should therefore accompany them, because that would endanger their status as knowledge. So he says that different degrees of certainty attach to them. The way out here would be to claim that though intuition, demonstration and perception differ in their evidence, we may still be legitimately certain of propositions learned in each of these several ways, and that there is no need to introduce degrees of certainty here. But to hold this would be to ignore a principle that goes very deep in Locke viz. that we should proportion our confidence to the strength of the evidence. So it seems that there is no easy way out for Locke from the curious position about the degrees of certainty.

I must now make some rather more explicit remarks about Locke's treatment of certainty. Locke sometimes identifies certainty with the perception of the agreement and disagreement of ideas. [23] But usually he thinks of certainty as more than a perception of the mind. He thinks of it as the full assurance or complete confidence that accompanies the perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas. For example, he says, "certainty depends so wholly on .... intuition," [24] and in another place, he says, "the perception produced by demonstration is also very clear; yet it is often with a great abatement of that evident lustre and full assurance that always accompany that which I call the intuitive," [25] and he says of perception "here I think we are provided with an evidence that puts us past

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[23] 4.4.7., 4.10.1.

[24] 4.2.1. emphasis mine.

[25] 4.2.6. emphasis mine.

doubting." [26] Yet perception is also "an assurance that deserves the name of knowledge." [27] Here he is prepared to call "assurance" both the perception of agreement and the state of full assurance. Locke is careless, then, in his use of "certain" and "fully assured", but the view that emerges most powerfully from the Essay is the view that certainty is a state that depends on the perception of the agreement etc., of ideas.

## 2. Judgment and Probability

Locke does not consider belief per se. He discusses judgment, which is a way of coming to believe, but only one way, as shall be seen as the thesis progresses. Locke states, in effect, that in cases where we are not able to know P, we judge that P.

> The faculty which God has given men to supply the want of clear and certain knowledge, in cases where that cannot be had, is judgment: whereby the mind takes its ideas to agree or disagree; or, which is the same, any proposition to be true or false, without perceiving a demonstative evidence in the proofs." 28

So to judge that P is to take P to be true on the basis of evidence that has not been seen to entail the proposition judged. When the evidence on which we "take it" that P is true is in verbal form, Locke says that we "assent" to P. When we are directly investigating the facts, and on the basis of the investigation take it that P, Locke says that we judge that P. [29] For Locke, then judging and assenting are essentially the same - both are truth claims made on the basis of evidence that has not been perceived to entail the claim. Assent and judgment differ, unimportantly, in the nature of their antecedents.

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[26] 4.2.14.

[27] 4.11.3.

[28] 4.14.3.

[29] ibid.

A proposition is probable, says Locke, when the evidence for it is not seen to entail it, and when, in the light of the evidence, the proposition "appears" to be true or false:

> So probability is nothing but the appearance of such an agreement or disagreement, by the intervention of proofs, whose connexion is not constant and immutable, or at least is not perceived to be so, but is, or appears for the most part to be so.... [30]

So the probability of a proposition may be measured by the extent to which it seems, to a person who has assessed the evidence, that the proposition is true. Probability is thus made a property of persons. And Locke does put probability in the same scale as certainty or assurance: " ... these probabilities rise so near to certainty," [31] he says. Evidently, there is little or no difference between saying that a proposition is probable if it seems to a person to be true, and saying that a proposition is probable if a person is confident that it is true.

Locke maintains that the grounds of probability (to be discussed in the next section) "are the foundations on which our assent is built, so are they also the measure whereby its several degrees are, or ought to be regulated." [32] Now there can be no degrees of assent as Locke has defined that term: we either take P to be true or we do not. But there are degrees of assurance or confidence, and it seems that it is in assurance that Locke must locate the degrees he impossibly assigns to assent. It follows, then, that the degrees of assent and the degrees of probability are, in Locke, one and the same: they are identical with the degree of assurance. And this is in accord with what he says about the degrees of assent - that they ought to be regulated in proportion

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[30] 4.15.1.

[31] 4.16.6. See also 4.15.2.

[32] 4.16.1.

to the grounds of probability. He doesn't say that assent ought to be regulated in accordance with probability itself.

But Locke gives another meaning to probability: "Probability is likeness to be true." [33] Truth is a property of propositions, hence "likeness to be true", or "likelihood of being true", is a property of propositions. And we find Locke ascribing probability to propositions:

> Upon these grounds depends the probability of any proposition. 34

This is a more plausible interpretation of probability, because, on the face of it, when we say that something is probable we are not talking about the mental state of any person. We mean that an event is likely to happen or to have happened, and hence that some proposition is likely to be true or to be made true.

When probability is interpreted as likelihood of being true, it follows that we can be more or less assured of a probability. We may be sure that a probability is high, or fairly confident that it is, or only mildly confident that it is. What is more, we can always be sure of a probability, when it is interpreted in this second way. For if we have some doubt about whether P is highly probable, we can at least be sure that it is slightly probable. Consider the following example:

When it has rained as hard as it is raining now the creek has always flooded.

It is probable that the creek will flood.

The premiss of this argument expresses an observation and a memory statement, hence it is a premiss that we can, according to Locke, be certain of. Perhaps, in virtue of it, we can be fully assured that it is very probable that the creek will flood. But at least we can be fully assured or certain that it is probable that the creek will flood.

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[33] 4.15.3.

[34] 4.15.6.

When probability is interpreted in this fashion it appears that, by weakening the probability, we can always make ourselves certain of it.

Locke glosses "judges" and "assents", as "takes to be true", or "presumes to be true." These locutions suggest that there is an element of risk in judgment. And Locke thinks that certainty never rightly attaches to a judgment - truth claims made on the basis of evidence not perceived to entail the claim must always be made with some doubt. Now in the chapter on "Degrees of Assent", Locke discusses degrees of probability, and we find that he has no doubt at all about what they are. For example, note this categorical assertion:

> The first, therefore, and highest degree of probability, is, when the general consent of all ages, as far as it can be known, concurs with a man's constant and never failing experience in like cases, to confirm the truth of any particular matter of fact attested by fair witnesses. 35

Locke maintains that such propositions "rise so near to certainty", but they are not certain for all that, so when we claim that they are true there is theoretically room for misgivings, although in practice we need not be that scrupulous. When Locke discusses the next degree of probability we find the same categorical assertion of what the probability is, combined with the statement that the corresponding truth claim ought to be made with no more than confidence. [36] But although the truth claim can only be made at some risk, it appears that the corresponding probability statement can be made with complete certainty.

So the position is this: a truth claim made with such and such degree of assurance is equivalent to an assertion made with certainty that a proposition is to such and such degree probable (i.e. is to such and such extent likely to be true). So although Locke runs two lines on probability -

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[35] 4.16.6. emphasis mine

[36] 4.16.7.

it is a feeling of assurance and it is the likelihood of a proposition being true, it turns out that what probability is on the one account can be converted to what it is on the other. Mere confidence in P's being true is equivalent to the certainty that P is more probable than not.

How does it come about that probability statements in these cases can be made without risk i.e. with complete certainty? The answer seems to be that if a man recognizes that there is strong evidence for P, then it is analytic for him that P is (to whatever degree) likely. If a man recognizes that there is strong evidence for P, and he is wondering whether P is a fact, he is determined to have some confidence in P. Or we can say that the man affirms P with confidence. Whether a man reacts to the evidence with a truth claim or not depends on whether he is thinking in terms of truth or likelihood when he considers the evidence.*

## 3. The Grounds of Probability

Locke distinguishes two grounds of probability:

(1) The conformity of anything with our observation and experience.

(2) The testimony of others 'vouching their observation and experience'.[37] Something 'conforms' to our experience if it is the kind of thing we have experienced. Thus we have observed that lead always sinks in water, that animals die when they are deprived of food, that metals always expand when heated. A report that a particular heated metal expanded 'conforms' to the way that we have observed metals to behave. Consequently, the report is probable. In Locke, the regularities and near regularities that constitute one kind of ground of probability have been experienced to hold by 'us', by a

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* In so far as Locke thinks of probabilities as likelihoods he is thinking of them objectively, since likelihoods are just as objective as facts. But there is no subjective difference between believing with certainty that P is (to whatever degree) likely and believing (with an equivalent degree) of confidence that P is a fact.

[37] Op.cit. 4.15.4.

community, not just the individual person. Consequently testimonies must first be accepted in order to discover that the regularities are that we have experienced. This can be seen in the following quotation:

> The first, therefore, and highest degree of probability, is, when the general assent of all men, in all eyes, as far as it can be known, concurs with a man's never failing experience in like cases, to confirm the truth of any particular matter of fact attested by fair witnesses: such as are the stated constitutions and properties of bodies. 38

The next highest degree of probability, says Locke, is based on what I, and 'all that mention it' have experienced to be conjoined 'for the most part'. [39] Locke's procedure, therefore, is different from Hume's , who would attempt to include testimonies within the regularities that an individual has experienced. According to Hume, an individual should note the type of person who always gives true testimonies, the type who mostly gives true testimonies, and the type who gives true testimonies more often than not etc. In order to make the correlation between type of character and accuracy of report, an individual will of course, have to do some personal checking himself. But once he has, he will be able to classify a witness, and will be able to reckon a probability, based on observed relative frequencies, that the witness is giving a true report.

But Locke explicitly acknowledges two foundations of credibility viz., common observation in like cases, and particular testimonies in that particular instance.[40] He considers a case in which a man is told by a self-described witness of something that runs counter to what he (the hearer) and his society had experienced. This is an interesting one for Locke, since he holds that we arrive at

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[38] Op.cit. 4.16.6.

[39] Op.cit. 4.16.7.

[40] Op.cit. 4.16.9 and 4.15.6.

our beliefs about the uniformities in nature on the basis of our own experience and the testimony of others. He tells the tale of a Dutch ambassador informing the King of Siam that in Holland in winter water became so hard that an elephant could walk on it. The King pronounced the Ambassador a liar, which Locke thinks is the predictable reaction for someone who had only experienced and heard of water lowering its temperature when cooled. But Locke does not think that the King's is the only rational reaction: that depends on the number and character of the witnesses, he says. Thus Locke's position is that observed uniformities do not always over-ride contrary testimonies.

Of course Locke does not deny that witnesses have to be evaluated. He says that we need to take into account the skill, the consistency and integrity of a witness.[41] Evidently, we do so because we have reason to think that certain types of characters more often tell the truth than do others. This point might make it seem that the only difference between Locke and Hume is that Hume is explicit about the inductions and much more rigorous about them than Locke. Indeed, there is this difference. Hume wants us to take seriously the relative frequencies with which witnesses of various characters give true reports, so that we can attach some sort of probability reading to the testimony from a new witness being true. Thus Hume explicitly absorbs testimonies into relative frequencies. Hence for him, observed regularities are the sole basis of probability.

But as we saw, Locke acknowledges <u>two</u> foundations of credibility. Locke does not have a developed position about testimony. He might argue that although we use observed correlations as a guide to the reliability of witnesses, the indefinite number of ways in which witnesses can vary makes it impossible to formulate any precise rules about all of them.[42] Hence the sort of prior probability

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[41] Op.cit. 4.15.4.

[42] Op.cit. 4.16.9.

we have that a witness is giving a true report, may on occasion be very vague. Hence on these occasions our attitude to a witness may be pretty close to sheer trust. Locke might argue too, that although we take character into account when assessing the reliability of a witness, this is not due to past inductions covering character and truth of reports, but that it is because of some other reason. This point will be developed in the chapter on testimony.

So Locke's view is the evidence can take the form of testimony or observed relative frequencies. In virtue of these, propositions are made probable, or likely to be true. [43]

## 4. The Freedom to Believe

In the last two paragraphs of the chapter 'Of Wrong Assent or Error', Locke mentions several bad reasons for believing anything. Some men, he says, believe propositions because they are resolved to stick to a party, or because their neighbours take them for granted, or because the propositions are part of received opinion, or because revered antiquity has cherished them, or because they have been stamped 'official' by an authority.

> 'All men are liable to error,' says Locke, 'and most men are in many points, by passion or interest, under temptation to it'. 44

But the temptations can be overcome, and our assent can be grounded on what Locke regards as its 'proper motive' [45] – probability. So there are good and bad reasons in virtue of which a man may come to believe anything, but, Locke says

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[43] There is one ground of probability, unimportant for our purposes, that relates to unobservables. See Locke, op.cit. 4.16.12.

[44] Op.cit. 4.20.17.

[45] Op.cit. 4.20.1.

> He governs his assent right, and places it as he should, who, in any case or matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves according as reason directs him. 46

'Reason' for Locke, is a term covering intuition and probable reasoning, but in the above passage it can refer only to probable reasoning, because knowledge is 'wholly above belief' [47] i.e. distinct from it.

Locke's talk about proper and improper motives for assent, and his identification of what he takes to be the right motive, makes assent look much more voluntary than he thinks it is. Although Locke in one place says that a man can choose to believe a proposition even after he has assessed the evidence for it, we must reckon that as an inconsistency. [48] Locke maintains that we can never choose to believe anything. "To believe this or that to be true, does not depend upon our will," [49] he says. Locke's position is that our fancies, needs and inclinations, without our noticing it, bring it about that we believe for the sort of motives that he lists. In The Conduct of the Understanding, and the chapter on 'Enthusiasm' in The Essay, Locke exhorts us to believe only when, and insofar as, there is evidence. He is urging us to withhold assent when we find ourselves being drawn to assent by a motive like the prestige of an opinion, and Locke is urging us to be critical and on our guard, lest our assent be engaged by unworthy reasons without our being aware of it. He is urging us, too, to ensure that we assess evidence properly, and not to slide into lazy or careless habits in the way we treat evidence. Finally, he is exhorting us to be reflective, and to free ourselves from all convictions other than those based on reason.

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[46] Op.cit. 4.17.24.

[47] Fourth letter for Toleration. Collected Works, Vol. 5, London 1824, p.559.

[48] Essay 4.17.16.

[49] First Letter for Toleration. Collected Works, Vol. 5. London 1824, p.40.

Evidently, we are free to make the effort to investigate what our beliefs are based on. And if we discover that they are unreasonably based we can withdraw them. But is it that we can withdraw them, or that we cannot fail to withdraw them, once we find that our assent has been determined by (e.g.) what we would like to believe? Locke does not ask that question. Still, we can pursue it. Can a man recognize that the sole reason for which he has believed P is that he wants to believe P or that P has been stamped 'official' by an authority, and go on believing P? The second example here is in a different category from the first, because although we might not think it a good reason for believing, the man concerned may consider it to be strong evidence. But when a man recognizes that he believes P only because he wants to, he is unlikely to consider that that is evidence. But can he recognize both that he believes P only because he wants to and that he has no evidence for P, and yet continue to believe P? It seems that he could. I will now sketch three cases in which a man might do this.

Firstly, there is the trivial case in which the man is distracted so that he forgets what he has discovered about the basis of his belief. He could continue to believe because his belief would then be in the same condition that it was in before his discovery. Secondly, a person may be convinced that there is no evidence for a belief he holds, yet continue to hold it, simply because he is not interested in whether there is evidence or not. He may recognize that there is no evidence, and just not care, and continue believing. Or a person may have held a belief up till time t, and he may then recognize that he has no evidence for it. But it may have done him no harm, and it may be that he simply cannot be bothered rejecting it. Besides, he may derive satisfaction from the knowledge that he holds the belief, and he may foresee that if he were to reject it he would have to make tedious consequential emotional readjustments. Such people might reject the proposition, only they do not think it worth their while. People of this sort are more interested in remaining the way they are, than they are interested in the

truth. Not only are they not interested in truth for its own sake, they are not interested in truth at all.

Is a person released from the kind of belief that was inculcated in his early childhood, and that his total environment has continually reinforced, as soon as he discovers that there is no evidence for it? Let us consider an unreflective person who, in middle age, becomes convinced that a belief with such antecedents is groundless. Does the man automatically give up the belief? Very probably not. But if he recognized that he had no evidence at all for it, his conviction must be shaken, at least momentarily. (I am assuming that he considers evidence important). As a result, his confidence may be permanently reduced, or it may recover, but his belief need not fail altogether. Very likely, the man would wait, expecting to discover that there is plenty of evidence for the belief. He may go out of his way to discover new grounds. He will then be conducting an enquiry, and he puts himself in the way of being affected by the evidence, whichever way it may fall out. Or he may simply be on the lookout for relevant information, find none, gradually forget about his difficulty, and fall back into his former security. But far from his realization that there is no evidence automatically releasing him from it, it may be that the man could not divest himself of the belief even if he had wanted to. In the long run he may lose the conviction by dint of patient enquiry. But then and there he may have been powerless to do anything but continue in the belief.

I here leave the discussion of cases in which P is already believed when it is discovered that there is no evidence for P, and turn to consider a point suggested by the case of the man who was not interested in whether or not there was evidence for the proposition held. This example of a person choosing to <u>continue</u> believing P, suggests that a person who is not interested in truth or evidence, might choose to believe P when he had never before believed P. A concern for truth irrespective of what the truth is about is not a predominant one for all people. Some people are concerned about the truth only in

some areas - outside these areas they don't care much what they believe. And there may be some people who don't care about the truth at all. People who are full-time entertainers or party-goers might not be at all interested in truth or evidence for propositions covering a wide range of fact or theory. In these ranges, the prestige attaching to an opinion may matter to them, and on the strength of that they might choose to believe P.

I return now to Locke's own considerations about the freedoms involved in assent. Locke maintains that observed relative frequencies and testimonies are the only 'vouchers and gauge' we have of the truth of P, and that we should believe only when we have such vouchers.[50] I shall now try to determine what freedom to accept propositions is left to us if we accept Locke's recommendation.

If we do accept it we will often have to undertake an enquiry - to seek out facts and check them, to appraise the formal aspects of arguments, to assess probabilities, to weigh competing probabilities and testimonies. We have a series of activities, any of which can be halted, and any of which might affect what it is that we ultimately believe. Evidently, if we foresaw that a train of enquiry might result in our accepting P, we might forego that enquiry, if we did not want to accept P. In this way we would exercise some control over what we believed: we could avoid believing what we did not wish to believe. Locke says:

> We can hinder both knowledge and assent, by stopping an inquiry and not employing our faculties in the search of any truth. 51

There is another way still, according to Locke, of exercising some control over what we believe. When we are conducting an enquiry, we will, if we are diligent, be on our guard against fallacies latent in arguments, and we will be on the lookout for all that may be said 'on the contrary side'. Locke remarks that until a full examination is made:

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[50] See footnote 43 for a qualification.

[51] Essay 4.20.16.

> There will be always these two ways (above) of evading the most apparent probabilities. 52

Locke considers that the apprehension of these reasons introduces an element of voluntariness into assent:

> So that I think we may conclude, that, in propositions, where though the proofs in view are of the most moment yet there are sufficient grounds to suspect that there is either fallacy in words or certain proofs as considerable to be produced on the contrary side; there assent or dissent, are often voluntary actions. 53

Now 'voluntary' is not the right word in this context, for assent may be perfectly voluntary, even when it cannot be helped, just as a situation which cannot be changed may be voluntarily accepted. For example, I may be locked in a room and not be able to get out, yet remain there voluntarily, in the sense that remaining there is in accordance with my will. Similarly, I can see no way out of assenting to 'Mr Nixon is President of the U.S.', but my assent is voluntary nevertheless.

The concept Locke needs here is something like 'subject to choice'. What is subject to choice is whether to suspend assent in virtue of the possibilities that more may be said against P or that there may be a fallacy in the argument to P or to ignore these possibilities and go on to assent to P on the strength of the evidence we have. It may be equally within a man's power to do either.

Locke believes that these two possibilities cannot always be used as a reason for not assenting to P when we have evidence for P. 'There is some end of it', he says. [54] One might question that. We have so often discovered that the connection between the premises and conclusion is weaker than we first thought, that it may seem that we always have sufficient reason to withhold assent from any conclusion whenever we please. But Locke is undoubtedly

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[52] Op.cit. 4.20.12.

[53] Op.cit. 4.20.15.

[54] Ibid.

correct. Sometimes we do know that we have finished the examination of a subject. In that case, the reasons here considered would no longer be accessible to us. Besides, sometimes the evidence is simply overwhelming, as Locke notes:

> Some proofs in matter of reason, being suppositions upon universal experience, are so cogent and clear, and some testimonies in matter of fact so universal, that (we) cannot refuse assent. 55

For example, anyone who reads newspapers could not doubt that in February and March of 1971 the South Vietnamese forces made a thrust into Laos.

But reasons relating to the arguments pertinent to an enquiry are not the only ones that may lead a man to withhold assent from the probability of P, even when he has strong evidence for P. Considerations about his own competence to make a judgment on the matter may be just as relevant. For example, a man may consider that he is not clever enough to be really justified in believing P, or that he does not have enough knowledge, generally, to assent to P, or that he is too muddled a thinker to assent to P, or that he is too tired to assent to P, or that no one could be really safe in assenting to anything in the area in which P is. These reasons relate to the man's capacity for assessing evidence. When a man suspects that there is something in these reasons, he may, in virtue of them, withhold assent from P, but he need not. A Catholic postal clerk may have spent some time thinking about the sacraments, and a conclusion may suggest itself to him. It may occur to him that it is not for a person such as he to come to a conclusion on such matters, but he may assent to the conclusion nevertheless.

It seems then, that very often when we have evidence for P, we can do one of two things. We can assert P on the basis of the evidence we have, or we can refuse to assent to P for the reason that something may be wrong with the

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55 Ibid.

evidence, or with our capacity to assess the evidence. In other words, in some situations it is up to us whether or not to trust the evidence we have. We have seen both that Locke acknowledges that, and also that we can cease an enquiry. These are the only freedoms with respect to accepting propositions that Locke explicitly recognizes, although we shall see that he is committed to more.

Once we have determined that the balance of the evidence favours P, that this is all the relevant evidence that there is, and that we have correctly interpreted it, can we do anything but have some degree of belief in P? Locke believes that we cannot:

> As knowledge is no more arbitrary than perception, so, I think, assent is no more in our power than knowledge ... what upon full examination I find most probable, I cannot deny my assent to. 56

And again:

> It is the nature of the understanding constantly to close with the more probable side. 57

But if Locke admits, as he does, that it is sometimes up to us to decide that a body of evidence is complete, then he indirectly concedes that we have a considerable measure of control over our belief. For sometimes we can decide to accept a body of evidence,that is, decide to accept what will determine our judgment. As we have seen, we do not always have the power to make this decision, but sometimes we can make up our minds that the evidence is good enough, and so accept it.

The evidence accepted will determine a probability. But what probability, precisely? Approaching certainty, highly probable, about fifty per cent probable? In some cases, a determination of the degree of probability is unavoidable, even though not precise. It is nearly certain that Caesar lived and was assassinated, highly probable

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56 Op.cit. 4.20.16.

57 Op.cit. 4.20.12.

that Hitler committed suicide. But in other cases there seems to be an element of arbitrariness in the determination of the probability. Consider the case of an intelligence officer trying to determine the enemy's location. He will, among other activities, piece together reports, consult reconnaisance photographs, and recall previous dispositions of enemy troops. Let us say that these methods result in supporting a conclusion. But it may not be evident just how probable they make it - whether they make it slightly probable or more than 50 per cent probable. It may be that the evidence gives no more support to the one probability than the other. In such a situation, the officer will have to choose to believe one of the probabilities.

The way in which evidence can be inconclusive and leave some room for choice comes up in Locke when he considers conflicts between observed relative frequencies and the reports of witnesses. 'There it is', he says, 'where diligence attention and exactness are required, to form a right judgment, and to proportion the assent to the the different evidence and probability of the thing'.[58] The Siamese King in Locke's story had to weigh against the uniformities of his own experience the contrary report of a man he identified as 'sober and fair'. Let us put aside Locke's version of the story and imagine (which could easily have happened) that the King could not wholeheartedly believe the report, but that he could not wholeheartedly disbelieve it either. Perhaps he might decide that it is slightly probable - that he would give the ambassador the benefit of the doubt, that he would not consider him a liar or mistaken, but would wait to see how he performed on subjects where the King could check on what he said. The King might thus hope to come to a more informed conclusion about the man's character. In this case, the King is not determined to any specification about the probability of the ambassador's testimony. He

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[58] Op.cit. 4.16.9.

decided to wait and see in order to acquire more evidence about the man's character, and thus put himself in a position to make a more enlightened judgment about the reliability of his testimony.

We have seen, then, that Locke admits that we do have a form of control over what we believe. He acknowledges:

(1) That we can always stop an enquiry and thus avoid believing a proposition which we suspect may be supported by the evidence that the enquiry may turn up.

(2) Even when we do have some evidence that makes P probable we can sometimes refuse to trust the evidence. And since evidence determines belief, Locke is committed to the view that the power that we sometimes have to accept evidence or not gives us indirectly a measure of control over what we believe.

We found further

(3) That in some cases we can reject a belief we already have, or we can continue in it.

(4) That where a person has no interest in evidence or truth he might choose directly to believe P.

(5) That sometimes the evidence does not determine a specific probability, and that in these cases we have to choose a probability.

It remains to consider briefly some interesting passages which Locke does not develop. Locke discusses belief in propositions of a sort which are of 'no interest or importance' to anyone like 'whether King Richard the Third was crooked or not' or 'whether Roger Bacon was a mathematician or a magician'. He writes:

> These and like opinions are of so little weight and moment, that, like motes in the sun, their tendencies are very rarely taken notice of. They are there, as it were, by chance, and the mind lets them float at liberty. 59

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59 Op.cit. 4.20.16.

In these cases, the mind surrenders itself to the first comer, says Locke. If that is so, we might argue, the mind might withhold assent from the first comer and surrender to the second, thus choosing directly what to believe. But choice implies a degree of alertness not present in the type of instance Locke has in mind. He is considering what happens in the dull half-light of the mind. We acquire this sort of belief without being aware of what is happening. They are the kind of belief Locke maintains we should free ourselves from when we become aware of them.

In another passage, Locke writes:

> Where the mind does not perceive this probable connection, where it does not discern whether there be any such connection or no; there men's opinions are not the product of judgment, or the consequence of reason, but the effects of chance and hazard, of a mind floating at all adventures, without choice and without direction. 60

For Locke, this is a remarkable passage. Certainly, it is his position that where belief is not the result of judgment or intuition belief is accidental and might take anything as its object, but he should not say that there it is without choice, because for him belief is never directly a matter of choice. And if there were no judgment or intuition, but there was choice, the belief might not be haphazard, and it might have some direction. It may be that where the mind is not determined by evidence it has the greatest freedom to believe.

It is important to note that Locke's thinking about the freedom that we have to believe takes place in the context of judgment. The question of what kind of freedom we have to believe reduces to the narrower question of what kind of freedom we have to assent to a proposition when we recognize that there is evidence for it. There are other ways of coming to believe besides judgment, and in later chapters we shall attempt to identify what freedoms they involve.

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60 Op.cit. 4.17.2.

# CHAPTER 2. CARDINAL NEWMAN

## 1. Introduction

In his book An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent Newman states forcefully that assent is a "free act" :

> 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]

This statement is not a careless aside, for Newman makes a closely similar statement several pages earlier. [2] And he says, in a different context,

> 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 exercize at the bidding of reason, and when reason forbids, to withhold. 3

These statements about assent and certitude show that Newman thinks that it is always within our power not only to assent but to be certain as well. His doctrines on these subjects are therefore appropriate material for this thesis.

Any philosophical reader of the Grammar of Assent will be favourably impressed by the originality of the work and by the graceful style. But although the book is pleasant to read, the reader often finds it surprisingly difficult to give an account of the thesis being expounded. Some of the causes of this commonly found difficulty [4] are worth taking note of. First of all, counter to the reader's intuitions, Newman thinks that assent is always given

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[1] John Henry Cardinal Newman. An Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent. Doubleday Image Edition. 1955. P.189

[2] Op.cit. P.187

[3] Op.cit. P.271

[4] H.H. Price mentions it. See Belief. Allen & Unwin. 1969. P. 316.

without reservations - "assent is an adhesion (of the mind) without reserve or doubt to the proposition to which it is given." [5] What is more, Newman thinks that that is an explication of the common meaning of the term, whereas it is a meaning idiosyncratic to himself. In the Grammar Newman returns repeatedly to the dispute with Locke about whether there are degrees of assent, and in this dispute he presupposes his concept of assent. But Locke thought that there is always room for uncertainty in any assent whatever. Further, to the reader's confusion, Newman himself makes, in a terminology different from Locke's, enough distinctions for Locke to say all that he wants to say about degrees of assent. Yet Newman returns several times to the lists to prove that "there is no medium between assenting and not assenting." There is indeed a real dispute between Newman and Locke, but it is about whether we can legitimately be certain of the truth of propositions which have been inferred but not demonstrated. Apart from these points, Newman has the generous motive of wanting "to get clearly across" what he means, so he often puts the matter in a number of different ways, with the result that a slight shift in subject matter sometimes occurs.

These are all philosophical shortcomings, and they must annoy the reader. It is true that in places Newman is muddled. The classical British Empiricists, especially Locke and Hume, are frequently inconsistent, although they are seldom muddled. However, their inconsistencies are more serious than are the muddles in the Grammar of Assent.

## 2. Assent and its Object

Newman describes assent as "a mental assertion" [6] To assert P is to state P. Assertions imply "the absence of

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[5] Newman Op.cit. P.145.

[6] Op.cit. P.33.

any condition or reservation of any kind, looking neither before nor behind, as resting in themselves and being intrinsically complete." [7] This rather strange qualification has to do with what Newman calls the "unconditionality of assent" and will soon be explained, but first it must be emphasized that assertion for Newman is a verbal utterance, and need not be attended by any "apprehension" of what is asserted. On the other hand, assent must be so accompanied, according to Newman. He seems to believe that all sentences are of a subject-predicate form. In order to "apprehend" what is put by a sentence, we must, says Newman, "impose a sense" [8] on the terms of which it is composed. This point he expresses alternatively by saying that when we apprehend a term we give an interpretation to it.[9] On this account then, to apprehend a term is to give it a meaning. Newman says that a person can do this in either of two ways. He can think of existing individuals for which the term stands, in which case he is giving a "real" apprehension to the terms, or he can think of universals, in which case he is apprehending "notionally". (I shall develop this distinction in the next section.) Newman asks "What measure of apprehension is sufficient" for assent? It is not necessary that the subject term be apprehended, says Newman, for it is often the function of the predicate term to explicate an unknown subject, and in these cases we can still assent to the proposition. Thus a child who has never before heard of lucerne may assent to the proposition "lucerne is food for cattle" since he apprehends, or can "impose a sense on" the predicate.

It is clear that Newman's sense of apprehension involves what today we call "entertaining a proposition" for by "apprehension" Newman means the act of fixing a meaning to a term. What we call "entertaining P" may not

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[7] Op.cit. P.25.

[8] Op.cit. P.29.

[9] See Op.cit. P.29 & 32.

imply as much as Newman's term "apprehending". But "apprehending" as Newman uses it does involve entertaining. This becomes plainest in his discussion of real apprehension and real assent, for it is clear that the objects of real apprehension are "held before the mind". The two modes of apprehending propositions will be discussed in the next section.

Newman defines assent as "the absolute acceptance of a proposition without any condition." [10] "Absolute" means "without any reservations." [11] Whenever we assent, we do so without any doubt at all, Newman maintains. He sometimes puts the same point differently: "Whatever a man holds to be true, he will say that he holds for certain." [12] Newman is convinced that his insistence on the absence of all doubt in assent reflects common usage, and so convinced is he that he attempts to explain away contrary-seeming locutions:

> A more plausible objection to the absolute absence of all doubt or misgiving in an act of assent is found in the use of the term firm and weak assent, or in the growth of belief and trust .... [13]

I am not going to discuss the point of whether or not Newman's use of "assent" is the ordinary one. I think it sufficiently clear that it is not. To assent to P, for Newman as well as Locke, is to accept P, but we all allow that when we accept P we may do so with more or less doubt, and that we may still be said to assent to P. However, we must note that when Newman uses "assent" he means "acceptance of P without any doubt."

Price infers from this that no matter how strong or weak the evidence for P may be, Newman must either accept P with complete certainty, or he must not accept P at all. [14]

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[10] Op.cit. P.32.

[11] See Op.cit. P.34.

[12] Op.cit. P.162-3.

[13] Op.cit. P.154.

[14] Price Op.cit. P.155.

Price thinks that Newman is committed to the position that we must be certain of P or we must reject P. But that is not so. It is true that there is no room for doubt in Newman's scheme, but there is room for probability. We saw that Locke could have dispensed with the degrees of assurance that he thought proper to the affirmation of truths by restricting himself to making claims about probabilities, which we can always do with certainty. That is what Newman does, only he thinks that some "probabilities" are so strong that we can claim them as true with full assurance. That is the essence of his dispute with Locke: In his own words, he rejects "the pretentious axiom that probable reasoning can never lead to certitude." [15]

Newman's intention in emphasizing that an act of assent is "unconditional" is to bring out what he takes to be the point of difference with an act of inference. When we infer, we recognize the consequences that a proposition has or that a set of propositions has. In other words, we recognize that the truth of a proposition is dependent on the truth of certain other propositions, or in the terminology that Newman favours, we recognize that the truth of a proposition is conditional on the truth of certain others. According to Newman, this conditionality is the essence of inference. [16] Newman points out that assent can take place in the absence of inference, and vice versa. [17] Since assent is distinct from inference, and it is the essence of inference to be conditional, assent, Newman infers, must be unconditional. He writes, contrasing inference with assent:

> When we infer, we consider a proposition in relation to other propositions; when we assent to it, we consider it for its own sake and in its own intrinsic sense. [19]

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[15] Newman Op.cit. P.136. This dispute is discussed in Section 6 of this chapter.

[16] Op.cit. P.145.

[17] Op.cit. P.142-3.

[18] Op.cit. P.145.

[19] Op.cit. P.32

And evidently, there is a difference between perceiving that P has some consequences and making a claim about the truth of a proposition.

If we hold that P is probable in relation to Q and R, we are not assenting to P, since its probability is dependent on Q and R, but we are assenting to "P is probable in relation to Q and R", since that is unconditionally held. (If probability is interpreted in the Lockean sense, the most natural interpretation of "P is probable in relation to ....." is "if ..... were all the relevant evidence then P would be likely to be true.") If we are convinced that P is highly probable in relation to all the relevant evidence, we may "detach" P and hold tout court "P is highly probable". We can assent to this proposition, Newman maintains, since it is no longer held merely as a consequence of premisses. When we say that P is highly probable, we are claiming that something is the case. Newman says in connection with probabilities:

> When I assent to a doubtfulness, or to a probability, my assent, as such, is as complete as if I assented to a truth .... I may be certain of an uncertainty. 20

For Newman, to assent is to claim P is true, or to accept P as the case, without any doubt. What is assented to must always be "detached" i.e., not held in a relation of dependence on other propositions. Although Newman initially introduces assent as "a mental assertion", the concept of assertion plays no more part on his concept of assent than it does in Locke's. It will be remembered that for Locke to assent is to judge. Locke calls a judgment an assent when the evidence is not directly confronted but is presented in the form of words. For Newman, to assent is merely to accept P without any doubt. The acceptance need not be subsequent to the perception of evidence.

This completes the account of Newman's view of assent. Now when Newman argued for the unconditionality of assent he used arguments which bear against Locke's thesis:

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20 Op.cit. P.147. See also "Opinion" PP.64-5.

If evidence for P ⟶ probably P ⟶ Some degree of belief in P. Since these implications are fundamental in Locke, I shall examine some of Newman's arguments. He writes:

> Sometimes assent fails, while the reasons for it and the inferential act which is the recognition of those reasons, are still present, and in force. Our reasons may seem to us as strong as ever, yet they do not secure our assent. 21

Newman explicitly supposes that a person in these circumstances may <u>not</u> have come to suspect that there is something wrong with his reasons for assenting, or with his capacity to understand the matter in hand, or that there is something more to be said against the proposition assented to. Is Newman asking us to suppose that the person's situation is as it was before except that his belief has lapsed? Not quite. Newman fills out the case somewhat:

> Sometimes our mind changes so quickly, so unaccountably, so disproportionately to any tangible arguments to which the change can be referred, and with such abiding recognition of the force of the old arguments, as to suggest the suspicion that moral causes, arising out of our condition, age, company, occupations, fortunes, are at the bottom. 22

However, I do not see how Newman's point can be sustained. If a person still "recognizes the force of the old arguments" and does not suspect that there is anything wrong with them, or even have a "feeling in his bones" that they can be assailed, it seems to me that he must recognize that the conclusion is to some extent made probable. And once he recognizes that, he has some belief in the proposition. It seems to me that the effects of age or company or whatever it is, must first deprive the arguments of force, if the assent is to fail.

Newman constructs a similar case:

> And as assent sometimes dies out without tangible reasons, sufficient to account for

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21 Op.cit. P.142.

22 Op.cit. P.142.

> its failure, so sometimes, in spite of strong and convincing arguments, it is never given. We sometimes find men loud in their admiration of truths which they never profess. 23

Once again, the question arises as to how someone can be convinced of an argument, yet not believe its conclusion. That does not seem to be possible.

### 3. Notional and Real Assent

Newman's distinction between notional and real assent does not have an important bearing on the freedom to believe, so I will not give much room to it. But if one understands this distinction, one is in a position to see why Newman is so confident in maintaining that assents are always given without any doubt. For he is prepared to admit that there are degrees of strength somewhere in our assents ....

> .... though these assents are all unreserved, still they certainly differ in strenth .... 24

but, he claims, the variations in strength do not lie in the assents themselves, but in the manner of apprehension that accompanies the assent, or whether what is assented to is notionally or really apprehended.

The adjectives "notional" and "real" apply primarily to modes of apprehending propositions, and only secondarily to assent. To give a notional or a real assent is to assent to propositions apprehended in one or other modes. In order to apprehend a proposition, according to Newman, we must "impose a sense" [25] at least on its predicate term. The sense we impose may consist of a general characteristic like "big" or "round" or "in the South" or "weighs five

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[23] ibid.

[24] Op.cit. P.34.

[25] Op.cit. P.29.

pounds". In all these cases we are apprehending notionally. But we may impose a sense that is a representation of things as they actually are in the world, or we may impose a sense that is a representation so particularized that it could be of something that is in the world. What is peculiar about real apprehensions is that they mirror the complexities and distinctive features of real situations. Notional apprehensions capture only some of the characteristics that are embodied in real situations.

There are at least two ways in which we can apprehend "really". We may picture to ourselves something that we have seen or found described in detail, or we may use a description so definite that it individuates a thing or event. Newman recognizes both these methods.[26] But he almost always thinks of real apprehensions as occurring through the use of images, especially memory images. He makes statements of this sort:

> In real assents the mind is directed towards things, represented by the impressions which they have left on the imagination. 27

Evidently, we can use the memory of actual occurrences as interpretations of terms of propositions, and thus think them in a concrete way. For example, a person who had witnessed a bushfire at close quarters might recall the fire when he reads the report "Inside, the building was a mass of flames." He will then be thinking of the event in a real, as opposed to a notional way. Newman tends to think that in order to apprehend "really" we must use images, or rather, copies of images that were once presented in perception. This theory is attractive to him, since he wishes to emphasize that the capacity for giving real assents differs from person to person, according to that person's experience. He tends to think that "real apprehensions" occur when a person reproduces to himself a sense content that he was presented with in the past.

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[26] See Op.cit. P.39.

[27] Op.cit. P.76.

When a person thinks of something he has perceived as an interpretation of a predicate he clearly is thinking in terms of real objects.

But if a person uses an individuating description to interpret a predicate, he is thinking "in terms of real things," just as much as is a person who is using images, and this is a point Newman seems not to appreciate. He tends to think that it is only by images that we "take hold of objects." Were a person using a description for this purpose he would be employing abstractions, and the extent to which a set of these defines a concrete situation varies according to how they are employed. We can conceive a scale with high generality at the bottom to detailed individuation at the top. But images too can more or less mirror a state of affairs. The more closely a conception reproduces concrete things the greater will be the "keenness and energy" [28] of the assents given to it. For in real apprehension the object is more "powerful" than it is in notional apprehension. A really apprehended object exerts a "greater force" on the mind, it makes a greater "impression", it possesses the mind with a strength, Newman alleges, that notional apprehension cannot rival. He elaborates:

> (Notional and real apprehension) give assent an internal character corresponding respectively to their own: so much so, that at first sight it might seem as if assent admitted of degrees, on account of the variation of vividness in the different apprehensions. As notions come of abstractions, so images come of experiences; the more fully the mind is occupied by an experience, the keener will be its assent to it, if it assents, and on the other hand, the duller will be its assent and the less operative, the more it is engaged on an abstraction; and thus a scale of assents is conceivable ... 29

Evidently, Newman thinks that in pointing out how assents can vary according to the strength or "reality" of the object, he can neutralize the reaction to his doctrine that

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[28] Op.cit. P.35.

[29] Op.cit. P.47.

there are no degrees of assent. Philosophers, he maintains, have failed to identify where it is that the variations in strength occur.

In outlining this doctrine I have concentrated on the way in which Newman uses it as a disclaiming device, to deflect criticism from another theory. This is not the major role of the doctrine in the Grammar. Newman thinks that real assents are a much greater motive force than notional assents. "Impressions lead to action," he says, "and reasonings lead from it." [30] He expands

> Strictly speaking, it is not imagination that causes action, but hope and fear, likes and dislikes, appetite, passion, affection, the stirrings of selfishness and self-love. What imagination does for us is to find a means of stimulating these motive powers .." 31

This thesis about the superior motive power of the concrete and conceptions that reproduce concrete things needs to take into account what Price calls "the passion for the theoretical." [32] But criticism and detailed exposition of this part of Newman's doctrine are out of my way.

## 4. The Classification of Notional Assents

Newman identifies a class of assents "so feeble as to be little more than assertions." [33] He calls them "professions." Given that Newmanian assertions need not even involve "intelligent acceptance" of the predicate, professions may be little better than sheer sound output. And the point that Newman wishes to make by comparing professions with assertions is that they are generally performances, and often social performances at that. As

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[30] Op.cit. P.91

[31] Op.cit. PP.81-2.

[32] Price op.cit. P.334.

[33] Op.cit. P.52.

examples he cites a person "without reflection" calling himself a Tory or a Liberal, or a person as a "matter of course" adopting the fashionable opinions of the time about music, wine, manners, personalities, or whatever else happens to be patronized "in higher circles." Evidently, professions (very aptly named) are pre-eminently cocktail-party performances.

What now of Newman's doctrine that assents are always given without reservation? Newman's way out of this position, via probability, is not open to him in this case, for he assumes, oddly, that professions never involve assertions of probability. Surely he doesn't think that we always make utterances of this sort without any misgivings? At this point, the fact that these professions are notional assents is made to carry more weight than it can bear. For notional assents, according to Newman, tend to be made "without any personal hold ... on those who make them." [34] Well, that much at least is true of professions. But surely it is also true that they are truth claims made with only a mild degree of confidence. However, as we have observed, there is no place in Newman's scheme of things for degrees of confidence, other than for complete assurance. But surely degrees of confidence belong to this class of assents.

We must now consider "credence" which is the sort of assent "which we give to those opinions and professed facts which are ever presenting themselves to us without any effort of ours." [35] Credence even covers the assents given to the "fresh informations" of the senses. Credence includes those "spontaneous acceptances" [36] which we give to what we perceive, what we read in newspapers and magazines, what we hear on radio and television, and what we "pick up" in conversation. This information, says

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[34] Op.cit. P.52.

[35] Op.cit. P.60.

[36] Op.cit. P.64.

Newman, "constitute(s) the furniture of the mind, and make(s) the difference between its civilized condition and a state of nature." [37] Newman comments interestingly on the important social and political function of information thus received.

Locke would have been hostile to this class of assents precisely because they are spontaneous. If we spontaneously accept P, how can we estimate the vouchers and gauge of P's probability? But Newman undoubtedly has a point. Without such assents we would lose much valuable information, and also the mind would be deprived of a stimulus for activity and progress. [38] If we were to weigh evidence for every claimant on our belief, as Locke would seem to have us do, the difference between the mind's civilized condition and its state of nature would never amount to much.

Newman uses "opinion" to stand for an assent to a proposition, not as true, but as probable. He is careful to distinguish between Inference and Opinion. The object of the latter, he says, is "independent of premisses". Opinion differs from Credence in that the latter is "implicit", by which Newman means "unconsciously given", whereas opinion is always "explicit", that is, conscious. It is the assenting that is unconscious. What is assented to must be "apprehended" from which it follows that it must be an object of consciousness. It is unclear whether Newman thinks that spontaneous assents are always unconsciously given, or whether that is only the general rule. At any rate, he seems to think that it is usual for spontaneous acceptances to occur without the subject's awareness of them. But opinion requires effort - we must measure and estimate in order to assess the probability, and presumably it is this effort of concentration that secures self-consciousness. If it does, that is. Once again, it is unclear whether Newman intends consciousness to be a

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[37] Op.cit. P.61.

[38] Op.cit. P.61.

defining characteristic of this class of assents, or whether he thinks that it is a universal or a merely common accompaniment. Fortunately, this vagueness has no serious repercussions in the Grammar.

It was pointed out above that Locke might forego assenting at all (in his sense) by confining himself to probabilities, which can always be claimed with certainty. Opinions are probabilities in the Lockean sense - they are propositions likely to be true. Newman says that "probability may vary in strength without limit". [39] It can thus do duty for the degrees of assent. Newman observes that in most cases in which we base our assents on evidence, we should only have an opinion about the conclusion. We can always be certain of probabilities, hence we can always assent to them, in Newman's sense. Should we be doubtful about how probable P is, we can always designate a lower probability which we are sure is warranted by the evidence. Of course we only have an "opinion" if we "detach" the conclusion. We can always claim that P is probable in relation to some other propositions, in which case, in Newman's terminology, the conclusion is the object of Inference.

Newman defines another class of beliefs, "Presumption" thus:

> By presumption I mean an assent to first principles; and by first principles I mean the propositions with which we start in reasoning on any given subject matter. They are in consequence very numerous, and vary in great measure with the persons who reason .... 40

The propositions that comprise this class are of the kind - "there are things external to ourselves," "there are other minds," "there is an order in nature." Newman's interest in this class is obscure. He seems scarcely concerned with their status as beliefs, and is chiefly interested in their relation to experience, in the end concluding

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[39] Op.cit. P.64.

[40] Op.cit. P.66.

> These so-called first principles, I say, are really conclusions or abstractions from particular experiences ... in themselves they are abstractions from facts, not elementary truths prior to reasoning. 41

Considered as beliefs, propositions such as these seem to form a sub-class within what Newman calls "credence." They are, for the most part, spontaneously accepted. Beyond that, owing to Newman's lack of discussion, it is hard to know what to say about them. Perhaps in this section Newman is making a point for the benefit of his scholastic co-religionists.

The fifth class of assents Newman calls "speculation." Newman acknowledges that the word is commonly used to mean a conjecture or "a venture on chances." [42] He says that the "proper" meaning of the word is "mental sight, or the contemplation of mental operations and their results as opposed to experience or experiment." [43] Here he seems to use speculation as it is used in the phrase "philosophical speculation." But the sort of assent he has in mind is not confined to speculation in that sense. He writes:

> I ... denote those notional assents which are the most direct, explicit, and perfect of their kind, viz. those which are the firm, conscious acceptance of propositions as true. 44

The conclusions of any sort of reasoning - mathematical, experimental, legal, theological or whatever, are said to be speculations, with this rider, that the conclusions assented to do not involve probabilities. Thus speculation is closely similar to Opinion, since the assents that comprise the class are explicit or conscious, and since they are frequently given to conclusions. Newman thinks that such assents are stronger than opinions, for the reason, presumably, that what is claimed as true is a fact, not a likelihood.

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41 Op.cit. P.69.

42 Op.cit. P.75.

43 ibid.

44 Op.cit. P.75.

Discussion of this classification of assents will be continued in the following section.

## 5. Complex or Reflex Assent and Certitude

In many cases, says Newman, assents are exercized unconsciously. This, he says, is no more than an accident of particular assents, but it is a common accident. Newman expands interestingly about the unconscious aspect of assent :

> A great many of our assents are merely expressions of our personal likings, tastes, principles, motives, and opinions, as dictated by nature, or resulting from habit; in other words they are acts and manifestations of self: now what is more rare than self-knowledge? 45

Of the classes of assents, Profession as well as Credence would contain many instances of assents unconsciously given.

Now the concept of an unconscious assent needs clarification. Firstly, it is incompatible with the description of assent as "mental assertion". It is vacuous to speak of unconscious mental assertions. Secondly, it is likely that most of us locate the reference of "accepts P" in the sort of acceptance we notice ourselves giving when we judge that P or when we agree with someone's claim that P. That is, it seems that we find the meaning of the word in a conscious event. What then, would we take to be the reference of the phrase "unconscious assent?

There is no difficulty in identifying what Newman is talking about when he uses the words "unconscious assent." He has in mind cases in which we consciously apprehend propositions and come to believe them at the time we apprehend them, as when a skilled orator gains our belief, or when we hear a news bulletin, believe it, but do not

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45 Op.cit. P.157.

realize that we have come to believe it. What has happened here, is that there has been a change from the state of non-belief in P to belief in P, and since a change of state is an event, and the change is made in respect of a consciously apprehended proposition, it is natural to call the event an unconscious assent.

The fact is, however, that the event (the change to belief) is hidden from us. What has happened is that it has been brought about that we believe P. We do not know what the nature of this change is, so it is perhaps confusing to give it a name that has been given sense quasi-ostensively, by reference to a conscious occurrence. But as long as we bear in mind that the phrase "unconscious assent" in fact designates a hidden event we will not be misled by the name. A phrase Newman occasionally uses - "to acquiesce in P as true," with its strong suggestion of passive acceptance, is an apt name for this sort of "assent".

But it is rather misleading to say that all unconscious assents are hidden events. That is true of the unconscious assents classified under Credence, but is not true of many of those classified under Profession, for though these assents may be given without the subject's being aware of them, they are often public events, as when someone says "Yes, D.H. Lawrence is a snobbish writer." But is the assent here part and parcel of the utterance, or is it something else besides? If it is identical with the utterance, then the reference of "unconscious assent" need give us no trouble, since we can identify the assent irrespective of whether the subject is aware that he is giving it. If a person makes a profession without noticing it, and the assent is not identical with the utterance, then I presume that it is a hidden event, and what I have said above applies to it.

It often happens that we reflect on the objects of unconscious assents ("simple assents" Newman calls them), search out the evidence for them, and on the basis of that, reaffirm the proposition. When a person does that, says Newman

> He does but repeat that assent which he made before, and assents to his previous assenting. This is what I call a reflex or complex assent. 46

Newman goes on to remark that if P is true, it may be said of such a person that he knows that he knows. Evidently, this is a legitimate locution in the circumstances, for if someone realizes that he assents to P and that he has good grounds for P, and if P is true, it is correct to say that he knows that he knows that P.

Unfortunately, Newman muddles his doctrines about reflex assent and about knowledge by defining knowledge in terms of reflex assent:

> Let the proposition to which the assent is given be as absolutely true as the reflex act pronounces it to be, that is, objectively true as well as subjectively:- then the assent may be called a perception, the conviction a certitude, the proposition or truth a certainty, or thing known, or a matter of knowledge, and to assent is to know. 47

But if we come to know something at $t_1$, it is not necessary that we should have unconsciously assented to it as $t_2$. The assent involved in knowing need not be a reflex assent.

Newman is not prepared to count a simple assent as an instance of knowledge. On the common analysis of "S knows that P," the following conditions must be met:

1) P is true
2) S has good grounds for P
3) S believes that P

All these conditions may be met when S gives a simple assent to P. But even so, such a simple assent would not amount to knowledge, according to Newman. For him, if S knows that P, S is in a state of certitude with respect to P. [48] For certitude, it is necessary, so Newman maintains,

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[46] Op.cit. P.158.

[47] Op.cit. P.162.

[48] See op.cit. P.163. Newman is not prepared to admit that we know without knowing that we do. If a person has good evidence for P and believes P because of the evidence, but is not aware that that is why he believes, he does not know P, according to Newman. Someone might say of this person that he knows P but is not aware of it. But Newman might reply that if the person has not consciously made the connection between the evidence and P, he cannot be said to know P.

that S knows both that he assents to P and that he has conclusive evidence that P. As an "accompaniment" or "token" of certitude, Newman thinks that there is a certain feeling:

> It is a feeling of satisfaction and self-gratulation, of intellectual security, arising out of a sense of success, attainment, possession, finality, as regards the matter which has been in question. As a conscientious deed is attended by a self-approval which nothing but itself can create, so certitude is united to a sentiment sui generis in which it lives and is manifested. 49

The feeling of certitude is "its practical test or its differentia." Newman identifies a necessary condition for certitude, or, as he says, an "a priori" condition. The condition has two clauses. The person must be confident

1) that the certitude will last
2) that even if the certitude failed, the proposition of which we are certain will still be true.

We must reject 1) as a necessary condition of certitude. A person may have some doubt about whether he will always be certain of P, but, then and there, that need not destroy his certainty of P. The second condition, however, must be allowed. If a person has some doubts about the truth of P, he is, of course, not certain of P.

When Newman introduces the term "assent" in The Grammar he says that assent is "absolute", "without reservations", "unconditional", and he defends against Locke the thesis of "the absolute absence of all doubt or misgiving in an act of assent." [50] He never says of assent, per se, that it is certain, for he wishes to make allowances for simple assents which, though made without doubt, are not certitudes in his sense, since they do not include awareness either of themselves or of the strength of the evidence, nor are they associated with "a specific feeling." Indeed they are not associated with a feeling at all, hence the appositeness of Newman's characterizations "without doubt," "without

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[49] Op.cit. P.168.

[50] Op.cit. P.154.

reservations." The specific feeling attaching to certitude - "the repose in self and its object" [51] accompanies only the consciousness of having knowledge.

Certitude, in Newman, is a mental state, certainty is a quality of propositions. "Those propositions I call certain, which are such that I am certain of them." [52] The kinds of proposition we ought to be certain of, is the core of Newman's dispute with Locke, but before dealing with that, it is worth while clarifying what Newman means by the puzzling phrase "the indefectibility of certitude."

The word "indefectible" suggests unfailingness, but it is well known that some of our certitudes do fail - when, for example, we become convinced of the contradictory of what we had previously been certain of. Newman recognizes this, and sets out cases in which certitude is retracted.[53] His thesis is that "as a general rule, certitude does not fail." [54] If the failure of certitude were "a frequent occurrence", says Newman, that would show that we have no right to be certain. So he argues that certitudes do not frequently lapse, pointing out, among other things, that what are often called certitudes are not really such. But he expresses himself in a confusing way, and it is not surprising that critics have been baffled by this section. For example, he writes

> Premising that all rules are but general, especially those which relate to the mind, I observe that indefectibility may at least serve us a negative test of certitude, or <u>sine qua non</u> condition, so that whoever loses his conviction on a given point is thereby proved not to have been certain of it. 55

If this is, as Newman says, a general rule, surely he should have said that whenever someone loses his conviction on a

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[51] Op.cit. P.169.

[52] Op.cit. P.271.

[53] Op.cit. P.188.

[54] Op.cit. P.181.

[55] Op.cit. P.206.

given point then we have good reason to believe that he was not certain of it. When Newman argues for the indefectibility of certitudes, he is not maintaining that certitudes are irreversible. He is arguing that they are, "on the whole", [56] not reversed.

## 6. The Dispute with Locke

In Belief, H.H. Price develops a view about Newman's dispute with Locke, taking it that what is at issue hinges on the controversy about the degrees of assent. [57] I believe that I have already shown that there is no important disagreement between Newman and Locke in this area. Price concludes his chapter on Newman and Locke with the observation that Newman is committed to the position that when it comes to accepting P, all that we can do is give "a total or unreserved self-commitment", [58] or lapse into "inert agnosticism." This shows that Price has quite failed to understand Newman. Consequently, I shall discuss the issue between Newman and Locke without further reference to Price.

The substance of the dispute is whether or not we can be legitimately certain of truths yielded by non-demonstrative arguments (i.e. arguments which do not entail their conclusions). We may be puzzled about why this should be a subject of dispute. A natural reaction is that "If P does not entail Q, it does not follow that we cannot be certain that Q on the basis of P." But as Hume remarks, "Mr Locke divides all arguments into

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[56] Op.cit. P.209. R.M. Chisholm misses this point. See Perceiving : A Philosophical Study. Cornell University Press 1957. P.20.

[57] See Price. Op.cit. Lecture 6. "Degrees of Assent : Newman's Criticisms of Locke."

[58] Op.cit. P.155.

"demonstrative" and "probable".[59] Newman is an heir to this tradition, and although he is suspicious of Locke's bifurcation, he accepts it in the Grammar, and poses his problem in Locke's terminology:

> How (is it) that a proposition which is not, and cannot be, demonstrated, which at the highest can only be proved to be truth-like, not true, such as "I shall die", nevertheless claims and receives our unqualified adhesion. 60

This way of putting the matter shows that at times Newman slid into the Lockean view that non-demonstrative arguments can at best yield likelihoods, not truths. He thus invites the question "how he (Newman) substantiates the bridge by which he steps so freely from the state of doubt which ... inevitably attaches to these results of probabilities, to the state of absolute certainty which he seems to substitute for this." [61] Evidently, this bridge can never exist, for if P is only probable, it cannot be converted into a certain truth. And some of Newman's locutions reinforce the conviction that he is presenting himself with an impossible task. For example, he makes it plain that he is going to contest "the pretentious axiom that probable reasoning can never lead to certitude." [62] But although he sometimes lapses into the Lockean language, he generally uses "probabilities" as a mere label for non-demonstrative arguments, and he is concerned to argue that probabilities in this innocent sense are not restricted to yielding likelihoods.

Newman's first move is to show that Locke inadvertently admits this too. In one place, Locke acknowledges that "we make no doubt at all" about some propositions that have

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[59] D. Hume. Inquiry. Liberal Arts Press. ed. C.W. Hendel, 1957, P.69.

[60] Newman: Op.cit. P.135.

[61] Letter from William Froude, F.R.S., to Newman. 1864. From James Collins ed. Philosophical Readings in Cardinal Newman. Regnery, Chicago. 1961. pp.61-62.

[62] Grammar. P.136.

not been infallibly demonstrated, [63] and in another place he says that we receive some such propositions "with as little doubt as if it were perfect demonstration." [64] As observations about what we do, these are undeniably sound, but Locke thinks that we ought not to be certain in these circumstances, for where conclusions have not the guarantee of entailment, Locke believes that we should do no more than "take them for true, without being certain that they are so." [65]

Newman then brings something like a paradigm case argument against Locke. He instances many propositions that, on the basis of evidence, we are certain of. I select the following. We are sure, Newman says, that these propositions are true:

1) That we are ignorant of many things, that we doubt many things, and that we do not doubt many things.
2) That the future is affected by the past.
3) That the universe is carried on by laws.
4) That the earth is a globe.
5) That there are great cities in different places on the earth.
6) That we had parents, though we can have no memory of our birth.
7) That we shall die, though we can have no experience of the future.
8) That the world has a history; that men lived before our time. That there have been a rise and fall of states, wars, revolutions, arts, literatures and religions.
9) That some parties are unjust or hostile towards us.

Newman's point, in adducing these instances, is that "assent on reasonings not demonstrative is too widely recognized an act to be irrational." [66] But why does

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[63] Grammar, P.137. See Locke op.cit. 4.15.2.

[64] Grammar, P.137. See Locke 4.16.6.

[65] Locke, op.cit. 4.17.2.

[66] Grammar. P.150.

"wide recognition" of a procedure prevent its being irrational? Newman offers an amplification: assent in these cases, he says, is "too familiar to the prudent and clear-minded to be an infirmity or an extravagance." [67] Newman has a point here. People acknowledged to be intellectually respectable do give an "unqualified adhesion" to these propositions. The onus passes to the Lockeans to show why we ought not be certain in the kind of case Newman cites.

Newman maintains that "the laws of the human mind ... command and force it to accept as true and to assent absolutely to propositions which are not logically demonstrated." [68] This brings us to the third argument against Locke. Newman thinks that it is "meaningless" to criticize and find fault with our own nature, as a sceptic might, for we have to use our nature in order to criticize and find fault. What we must do, Newman says, is ascertain what our nature is, and then use it in order to progress intellectually. And in order to find out what our nature is, or what the "law of the mind is" as regards assent, we must appeal to the facts, "to the ordinary action of man's intellectual nature." [69] Newman thinks that an examination of the relevant facts shows that it is a law of our minds that we assent in the sort of circumstances he instances. From this standpoint, he says, with Locke in mind, that "we do not gain the knowledge of the law of (intellectual) progress by any a priori view of man." [70]

This argument may have force against a sceptic, but it is not very telling against someone who claims that a single intellectual procedure ought to be revised. And whatever the facts may be about how people distribute their certitudes, Newman thinks that these should be confined to

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[67] ibid.

[68] Collins. Philosophical Readings in Cardinal Newman. P.154.

[69] Grammar. P.274.

[70] ibid.

the "elements of our knowledge." Beyond these "lies a vast subject matter of opinion, credence and belief." [71] Newman himself restricts the area of certitude. Why should someone else not restrict it further?

All Newman's arguments do then, is show that we are commonly certain of conclusions that have not been deductively arrived at, and that we do not think it irrational to do this. This may seem pretty small beer, but Newman is satisfied with it.

> Earnestly maintaining, as I would ... the certainty of knowledge, I think it enough to appeal to the common voice of mankind in proof of it. That is to be accounted a normal operation of our nature, which men in general do actually instance ... How it comes about we can be certain is not my business to determine; for me it is sufficient that certitude is felt. This is what the schoolmen, I believe, call treating a subject in facto esse, in contrast with in fieri. Had I attempted the latter, I should have been falling into metaphysics; but my aim is of a practical character ... 72

But why does Locke think that we should be less than certain of the sorts of conclusion that Newman cites? His reason is simply that they are not perceived to be true. It may be recalled that Hume just dismissed Locke's position:

> One would appear ridiculous, who would say, that 'tis only probable the sun will rise tomorrow, or that all men must die. (Such statements are ) ... entirely free from doubt and uncertainty. 73

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[71] Op.cit. P.192.

[72] Op.cit. P.270. In fact Newman has a markedly positivist turn of mind. On p.70 of the Grammar he writes "Experience teaches us nothing about physical phenomena as causes." In a letter to a Mr Blanchford he writes "For myself I am very far from agreeing with many of your positions, e.g. that matter is 'that which occupies space;' I am utterly ignorant what matter is objectively - phenomena prove that it exists but not what it is. Therefore space is only the word for the idea of a break in the continuity of phenomena, and is doubly subjective, as depending on phenomena which are subjective and as being bowed out of actual existence by the actual continuity of phenomena." Philosophical Readings in Cardinal Newman, ed. J. Collins, P.204.

[73] D. Hume. A Treatise of Human Nature. Selby-Bigge. P.124.

And Newman feels the need to argue against Locke only because he was worried by the view that if P is a conclusion, and P has not been demonstrated, then P must be probable.

Newman gradually became clearer on this point. In a letter written nine years after the publication of the Grammar to William Froude, a scientist who had maintained the Lockean position against him, Newman wrote:

> We differ in our sense and our use of the word "certain". I use it of minds, you of propositions. I fully grant the uncertainty of all conclusions in your sense of the word, but I maintain that minds may in my sense be certain of conclusions which are uncertain in yours. 74

When we recognize an uncertainty in the proof, says Newman, we recognize that "it is not wholly complete" [75] or that "there is always a residuum of imperfection in it." [76] Although Newman is thus able to clarify the subject, it is evident that he thinks of inductive arguments as though they fall short of demonstration. Putting the matter this way actually strengthens the Lockeans' position, for they would point out that when we deduce P the grounds for P are tighter than they are when we affirm P on the basis of evidence. Yet if we are certain of P in this case, we have not varied anything in our acceptance of P according to the lesser strength of the evidence. Since we are certain in the first case, they would say, we should be less than certain in the second. And this is the point to which Newman's dispute with Locke takes the discussion.

Finally, Newman's motivation in taking up this issue with Locke is religious. He thinks that unless the mind can have its way and be certain of the sorts of conclusion he instances, then religious life will be that much

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74 Philosophical Readings in Cardinal Newman. ed. James Collins. P.153.

75 Op.cit. P.154.

76 Op.cit. P.161.

ennervated. For Newman believes that unless a person holds something as a fact, it will never play an important part in his life. He has an extraordinarily strong belief in the "power of the concrete upon the affections and actions." Hence if the mind must check its certitudes, and rest in probabilities, Newman is afraid that the hold of religious convictions on it will be weakened.

## 7. Newman on the Freedom to Believe

Newman distinguished assents into the classes profession, credence, presumption, opinion, speculation and complex or reflex assents which are themselves included in certitude. Opinion, speculation and certitude are cases of what Locke calls judgment and I have already attempted to identify the kinds of freedom we have when we undertake to judge.

Unlike Locke, Newman makes no attempt to locate the freedoms that exist within the context of judgment, but he states several times, very explicitly, that we do have complete freedom to give or withhold assent whether we are judging or not. In addition to the quotations on the first page of this chapter, there is the following statement:

> I could indeed have withheld my assent, but I should have acted against my nature, had I done so when there was what I considered a proof; and I did only what was fitting, what was incumbent on me, upon these existing conditions, in giving it. 77

Newman puts this position forcefully, several times, but sometimes he makes statements that appear incompatible with it. For example, he says:

> When an argument is in itself and by itself conclusive of a truth, it has by a law of our nature the same command over our assent, or rather the truth which it has reached has the same command, as our senses have. 78

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77 Grammar. P.187.

78 Op.cit. P.144.

But we can distrust our senses, and the previous quotation makes it clear that Newman thinks that we can act against our nature.

However the account Newman gives of the sort of inference we commonly make to concrete particulars (that is the sort of inference he is interested in in the Grammar) is inconsistent with his extreme libertarian position about judgment. According to Newman, when we wish to establish facts of the kind "Great Britain is an Island", "the earth rotates on its axis", "a Roman, not medieval monks, wrote the works attributed to Livy", we accumulate probabilities, which, if we are fortunate, we shall see converge on a conclusion:

> The conclusion in a real or concrete question is foreseen and predicted, rather than actually attained; foreseen in the number and direction of accumulated premisses, which all converge to it, and as the result of their combination, approach it more nearly than any assignable difference, yet do not touch it logically (though only not touching it), on account of the nature of its subject matter, and the delicate and implicit character of at least part of the reasonings on which it depends. 79

The characterization of the move from the converging probabilities to the conclusion on which they focus as a "foreseeing" or a "prediction" leaves some room for freedom in the final judgment. For some predictions can be withheld. But on the other hand, some probabilities may be so "close" to a conclusion, that we cannot but foresee them, and in these cases we could not help making the final judgment.

Thus although Newman states energetically enough that we have unrestricted freedom to assent and judge, his theory of the nature of inference to concrete things suggests that sometimes we cannot but conclude as we do in these matters. But there is a position in Newman which is interesting from the point of view of the freedoms we have in judgment. This is his point that even though the object

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79 Op.cit. P.254.

of an assent may have been argued to, it is, qua object of assent, detached from argument. Very often we decide to detach a conclusion and hold it simply as a fact. Consider the following example of Chisholm's. We may find that the statement "John is a native" is probable in relation to "Eighty per cent of the merchants are natives and John is a merchant", and improbable in relation to "Ninety-Nine per cent of the natives can speak the language and John can not." [80] Under these circumstances, we should not hold, with certainty, "John is not a native." But if we discover another statement in virtue of which it is improbable that John is a native, we may decide to detach this statement from those in relation to which it is improbable, and assert, with complete assurance, "John is not a native."

Sometimes the evidence is so overwhelming that we do not have to decide that a "detachment point" has been reached. But sometimes we do decide that. A decision to detach is tantamount to a decision both to terminate the enquiry and to trust the evidence in hand.

I now leave judgment and turn to the assents classified under Profession and Credence. (It will be remembered that I subsumed Presumption under Credence.) Newman thinks that most assents under these heads are made unconsciously:

> Those assents which we give with a direct knowledge of what we are doing, are few compared with the multitude of like acts which pass through our minds in long succession without our observing them. 81

That is undoubtedly correct. We read newspapers, hear news bulletins, engage in casual conversations with all kinds of people, we have streams of disconnected thoughts going through our minds, and on many such occasions we "receive propositions as true" although we are not aware of it. And if we are not aware that we are assenting, we are powerless to do anything about it.

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[80] See R.M. Chisholm. op.cit. P.23.

[81] Op.cit. P.157.

But not all "credences" need be given unconsciously. "Credences" are "spontaneous acceptances." P may be so attractively described to me by a master persuader like an insurance or car salesman that my spontaneous reaction is to accept P. I may observe this reaction in myself, and let it proceed unchecked, or I may adopt a critical frame of mind and suspend acceptance of P in favour of consideration of P. Here there would be a choice not to believe P rather than to believe P. William James has an interesting comment about acceptance-reactions:

> Mankind's cardinal weakness is to let belief follow recklessly upon lively conception, especially when the conception has instinctive liking at its back. 82

Just as there are acceptance-reactions to propositions, there are rejection-reactions as well. These reactions are articulated in sentences like "I can't believe that" and "I'm not going to believe that". Persons making such statements are not going to consider P or the evidence for P. They are just going to reject P. "That's not true," a man may say, dismissing the matter from his mind. But rejection-reactions can sometimes be overcome, and P might be considered. If a man did choose to overcome a rejection-reaction, rather than let himself continue in it, he would have chosen not to believe not-P, rather than to believe not-P.

These decisions to "pull out of" acceptance or rejection reactions are not mentioned by Newman, but the subject of credence leads naturally to them. And Newman does make a point which is closely related to them. He writes:

> Till assent to a doctrine or fact is my habit, I am at the mercy of inferences contrary to it; I assent today, and give up my belief, or incline to disbelief, tomorrow. 83

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82 William James. The Will to Believe and Other Essays. Dover Edition. 1956. Preface. P.X.

83 Op.cit. P.153.

Newman offers as an example the case of a person coming in to possession of evidence that established the innocence of a man whom he had long considered guilty of an offence. The person who had discovered the evidence continues to find himself believing propositions which are implied by the others guilt. He may alert himself to prevent that happening. And it may be that as a result of his alertness he does not believe what otherwise he would have believed. However, unlike overcoming a rejection reaction, there is no choice here not to believe something. This is a case of a self-imposed state preventing beliefs which otherwise would have come about.

I now leave Credence to consider Profession. Very often, the assents in this class are unconscious, in which case we are not free to give or withhold them. Newman says that such assents "are often little more than prejudices." [84] But sometimes our opinion is called for in situations in which we are unable to assess evidence. On such occasions we determine our professions by

> What is probable, what is safe, what promises best, what has verisimilitude, what impresses and sways us. 85

When we take into account what is probable or what has verisimilitude, we are judging, even if, as this context implies, the evidence is weak. But when we take into account what is safe and what promises best we are "professing" in accordance with a motive, and it seems that we could equally have declined assent. On occasions such as these, if one professed and if one were reasonable, one would be venturing a mild opinion (in the ordinary use of opinion - not Newman's). But though this is only a weak belief, little better than a prejudice, as Newman says, it is still a belief, and one that might have been withheld.

We have found then that Newman states forcefully but does not argue that we have unrestricted freedom to assent,

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[84] Op.cit. P.161.

[85] Op.cit. P.192. This quotation is rather out of context, but is an apt description of what we do in these circumstances.

even after the assessment of evidence, but that his doctrine about inference to concrete particulars restricts the freedom to judge. However, investigation of the "detachment" of conclusions revealed that we can decide when a suitable detachment point has been reached, and that this decision involves a choice both to terminate an enquiry and to trust the evidence in hand. A study of "credence" revealed that sometimes we can choose not to believe P when we would otherwise have believed P, and that we can choose not to believe not-P when we would otherwise have believed not-P. We found also that it is sometimes within our power to give or withhold professions.

# CHAPTER 3. HUME

## 1. Hume on Belief

Locke's interest in belief focused on judgment. That topic is of only subsidiary importance in Hume's writing on belief. The paradigm of belief that he moves to the centre of the stage is the sort of belief that is brought to mind by a present impression. Hume states his problem of belief with admirable succinctness in An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature:

> When I see a billiard ball moving toward another, my mind is immediately carried by habit to the usual effect, and anticipates my sight by conceiving the second ball in motion. But is this all? Do I nothing but conceive the motion of the second ball? No, surely. I also believe that it will move. What then is this "belief?" 1

Before discussing Hume's answer to this question, it will be helpful to consider what he says about the beliefs that attach to the senses and memory.

Evidently, when we observe our environment, we form beliefs about it. I look at my desk and see paper there. As a result I believe that papers are on the desk. I recall that there is a large pine tree at the side of the house in which I live. In recalling that fact, I also believe it. Belief is intimately connected with both perception and memory. Hume expresses a view about this "connection":

> To believe is in this case to feel an immediate impression of the senses, or a repetition of that impression in the memory. 2

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1 David Hume. An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature. From An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding with a supplement An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature ed. C.W. Hendel. The Liberal Arts Press, New York, 1955, P.189.

2 David Hume. A Treatise of Human Nature. ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge. Oxford at the Clarendon Press, P.86. The Edition here used is a paperback which incorporates the three books of the Treatise.

His view is that the belief is identical with the individual perception or memory. I do not wish to comment on this view, except to note that it is plausible to hold that in perceiving X we believe in the presence of X and that in remembering that X we believe that X. What is important here, is that Hume identifies the belief with "the force and liveliness of the perception" [3] so that for him belief in these cases is nothing in addition to forceful impressions.

But Hume is not greatly concerned with the beliefs that attach to memory and perception. He is interested in beliefs about matters of fact that are not present to the believer and that are not remembered. In order to assist towards a satisfactory characterization of such beliefs, Hume asks us to imagine a person entertaining a proposition but not believing it at $t^1$, and then entertaining it and believing it at $t^2$. What, he asks, is the difference between these two situations? It is not that a new idea is added to the proposition believed, he says, because there is no such idea, and if there were, it follows that by adding the idea to any non-contradictory proposition we could believe anything we please. But, says Hume, that is absurd. [4] Since the proposition believed remains the same, the difference, he concludes, must be in the manner of conceiving the proposition.

Now that characterization is ambiguous, for it may refer equally to an attitude that the mind takes to the proposition or to the manner of appearance of the proposition (or as Hume says, "ideas"). A student of Locke would naturally think that the difference that puzzled Hume lies in the claim the mind makes about the proposition viz., the mind now claims that the proposition is true, or affirms the proposition, whereas before the mind merely entertained the proposition without making any claims about it. But by "manner of conceiving" Hume means "manner of

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[3] ibid.

[4] See Abstract op.cit. P.190.

appearance". Propositions believed have an "additional force and vivacity." [5] Hume found it difficult to characterize precisely the peculiar quality of believed propositions. Sometimes he says that they are more "lively" than others, but in the Appendix he writes of a superior force or solidity or steadiness. [6]

It may be thought that what Hume is trying to do is describe the characteristic "feel" of believed propositions, and that he is not attempting to say what believing them amounts to, nor is he trying to define what belief, in general, is. In support of this claim, reference might be made to Hume's statement of his objective in the section of the Treatise that deals explicitly with belief:

> In order then to discover more fully the nature of belief, or the qualities of those ideas we assent to, let us weigh the following considerations. 7

And Hume writes of belief "bestowing on our ideas an additional force and vivacity." [8] Obviously, a belief can't do that if it is an idea of additional force and vivacity. Now it seems to me (and on this I shall later elaborate) that Hume's achievement in his work on belief is that he identifies a special class of beliefs which consist solely in the appearance to the mind of a proposition with a certain "feel". But he thinks that what he is doing is stating what the nature of belief is, and hence that his analysis holds good for any situation in which P is believed. For he says

> (I have) explained the nature of belief, and shown that it consists in a lively idea related to a present impression. 9

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[5] Treatise. P.96.

[6] Treatise. P.629.

[7] Treatise. P.94 my emphasis.

[8] Op.cit. P.96

[9] Op.cit. P.98.

Hence the statements that belief produces the additional strength and vivacity, which are fairly common, [10] must be noted as inconsistencies. For Hume says, again,

> I conclude, upon the whole, that belief is a more vivid and intense conception of an idea, proceeding from its relation to a present impression. 11

Professor Quentin Gibson has pointed out that Hume emulating Newton, was a great simplifier, and wanted his psychological explanations to be in terms of as few entities as possible. Consequently, he did not want to have to acknowledge beliefs as well as impressions and ideas. And by showing that beliefs are more forceful ideas, he is able to identify them with the data of perception and memory. But in these cases, the belief is just an impression. Why is belief, in his explicit treatment of the subject, a lively idea related to a present impression?

The reason is that Hume's examination of belief is carried out in the context of a discussion of causal inference. As the first quotation from the Abstract shows, Hume is concerned to explain why what is thought of, or better, brought to mind by an impression, is believed. His theory is that we have observed constant conjunctions in the past, hence the ideas of the conjoined events become associated in our minds. Thus when we see one of the conjuncts, we are not only reminded of the other, we believe that it is (or was or will be) present. When I see a billiard ball travelling towards another in a straight line I believe that the balls will collide, and that subsequently they will both move. Hume writes:

> (My mind) not only conceives that motion but feels something different in the conception of it from a mere reverie of the imagination. The presence of this visible object, and the constant conjunction of that particular effect, render the idea different to the feeling from these loose ideas which come into my mind without any introduction. 12

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[10] See for example Treatise P.101.

[11] Treatise.P.103.

[12] Abstract. P.190.

Now it seems that in cases of the kind where beliefs are brought to mind by a sensory stimulus or a memory, Hume is correct in insisting that all they consist in is a proposition with a certain "feel". To take another example of Hume's, when a man travelling in the country sees a river in his path "he foresees the consequences of his proceeding forward." [13] He realizes (or has beliefs about) what will happen if he crosses the river. But the belief, which is automatic given the stimulus, consists merely in the man's thinking of a proposition, which has a certain feel about it which is different from the "feel" associated with, say, daydreams. Hume is correct in insisting that there are no mental activities with respect to the proposition believed:

> The objects seem so inseparable, that we interpose not a moment's delay in passing from one to the other. [14]

In this kind of case, the insistence on the direct passage of the mind from the impression to the simple apprehension of a proposition "different to the feeling" is faithful to the phenomenological facts.

H.H. Price gives an excellent account of the special kind of belief that Hume describes, but he thinks that Hume holds that the belief can be activated only by a sense impression. [15] This has the effect of committing Hume's official theory of belief to the thesis that all beliefs are environmentally determined, since they would then be tied to sensory stimuli. But that is not the case, even on Hume's official theory. It is Hume's doctrine that an impression is required to activate a belief, but the impression can be either of the senses or memory. Thus if I remember a car approaching a ford in a river, the associated belief, that its brakes will fail when it emerges, will be brought to mind. The inclusion of memory here,

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[13] Treatise. P.103.

[14] Treatise. P.104.

[15] H.H. Price. Belief. Allen & Unwin, 1969, Ch.7.

frees the sort of belief Hume is discussing from sole dependence on sensory stimuli. Hume writes:

> 'Tis therefore necessary, that in all probable reasonings there be something present to the mind, either seen or remember'd; and that from this we infer something connected with it, which is not seen nor remember'd. 16

Before explaining and setting out the rationale of the relation that Hume identifies between the impression and the belief that is brought to mind, I will discuss his theory of judgment. It will be recalled that Locke associated probable reasoning with judgment, which obviously need not be tied to a present impression, or even a memory, and which does not proceed automatically. Hume acknowledges that not all conclusions about probabilities "arise directly from the habit." [17] Some of them arise in an "oblique" manner which he endeavours to explain. What we do, he says, is reflect on the frequencies of past events that are relevant to the issue being considered. Images of similar events "unite together" [18] or are "melted together." [19] The greater number of similar images fuse into the most forceful idea which constitutes belief in the probability. The degree of belief (strength or forcefulness of the idea) varies in accordance with the number of favourable instances recalled, and with the number of unfavourable instances recalled. If there are few favourable examples and no adverse ones, there will be a mild degree of belief, or a not very forceful idea, and if there are a great many favourable examples but a considerable number of unfavourable ones, there will again be a mild degree of belief.

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[16] Hume. Treatise, P.89.

[17] Treatise, P.133.

[18] Op.cit. P.135.

[19] Op.cit. P.140.

Hence the only voluntary aspect of deliberations concerning probability, according to Hume, is the turning back of the mind to consider relative frequencies of occurrence. Once that has been done, the most commonly observed (if remembered) secure, or rather on Hume's theory, constitute belief. Given this rather mechanical model of probable reasoning, and given that the reflection essential to it is exercised on copies of the data of experience, Hume is able to say that "probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation." [20]

So far, the consistency of Hume's official account of belief with his account of memory and perceptual beliefs has not been discussed, nor has the relation of the belief to the "present impression" been specified. The relevant relation, it turns out, is that of cause and effect. Hume writes in the Appendix

> We can never be induced to believe any matter of fact, except where its cause, or its effect, is present to us. 21

But what now of memory? And what of "education"? Hume contends that the beliefs that result from education exceed those that result from abstract reasoning or experience. [22] His theory is that repetition of ideas in education produces liveliness in them, or in other words, produces beliefs. He says:

> Here we must not be contented with saying, that the vividness of the idea produces the belief. We must maintain that they are individually the same. 23

The situation, then, is this. Memory consists of beliefs about absent objects, education can result in beliefs about such objects, yet Hume insists that only an impression of a cause or effect can take the mind beyond what is perceptually given.

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[20] Treatise, P.103.

[21] Op.cit. P.629. For an identical passage see Inquiry P.167. See also Treatise, P.109.

[22] Treatise, P.117.

[23] Treatise, P.116.

In his writing about the nature of belief, Hume seems to have forgotten his doctrine that beliefs are just the more forceful impressions. He seems to have forgotten it, because in the belief passages he is trying to identify an associating principle that can legitimately lead to belief, or that results in rational belief. By insisting on the causal relation, he can make sure that we believe only facts. After all, there are plenty of other associations that will not lead to belief in facts. Innumerable haphazard associations can connect a person's ideas, and Hume is acutely conscious of "the irregularity of the imagination". The over-heated brains of lunatics produce solid and forceful ideas, and education does the same. Lunacy and education forge innumerable mental associations such that on presentation of an impression a believed proposition is brought to mind. But such beliefs, according to Hume, are not rational. Consequently, something besides mere association is required in order to account for rational beliefs. So the doctrine is pronounced that it is only rational to believe a proposition about an absent matter of fact when the proposition is about the cause or effect of whatever the impression is of. And the impression may be either of the sense or memory. Hence the clause "... related to a present impression" in the definition of belief is not to be taken as a definition of belief per se, since that is often enough said to be a more vivid and forceful impression, but a specification of the sort of association that results in rational beliefs.

As has been shown, there are other sorts of associations that can lead to beliefs. Since they are irrational, they are beliefs that we ought not to have. Hume might agree with that, but he would say that if an associative link brings to mind a vivid, forceful idea then we have a belief and there is nothing that we can do about it. But if we prescind from Hume's theory of impressions and ideas, and concentrate on what I argued was the achievement of his theory about the nature of belief - that he identified some occurrent believings that do just consist of a proposition occurring to us in a special sort

of way, then it seems that an associative linkage could result in a proposition appearing in that way, and we might perceive that we ought to withhold belief from it. For example, whenever I see a certain German acquaintance of mine, it always occurs to me (wrongly) that he is an officer in the German army. That proposition comes to me with exactly the same feel as does the proposition "Stauffenberg carried the bomb into Hitler's briefing room" whenever I hear the name "Stauffenberg". But in the first example, I withhold belief from the proposition. In the second example I do not. In this instance, the manner of appearance of the proposition may be said (following Price) to be a manifestation of a belief disposition. I acquired the belief about who carried the bomb into Hitler's briefing room some time ago, and the words I hear bring it to consciousness. But the proposition about my German acquaintance appears in a similar way and I do not believe it.

From this we must conclude that a certain characteristic manifestation of belief dispositions is essentially similar to the manifestation of a disposition which is not a belief. We can recognize the nature of the manifesting occurrence, and as a result withhold assent from it. In this kind of case the belief attitude (or rather suspension of belief) cannot be identified with the object of the belief attitude. Rather it must be identified with the mind's reaction to its object. This is not a conclusion that Hume would welcome, since he did not want to countenance belief as something different from impressions and ideas. In fact he makes no theoretical provision for this kind of case, for, according to him, there is no mind apart from ideal presentations, hence nothing that can react in a disbelieving way to them. But his view that there are propositions or ideas that it would be irrational to believe, leads naturally to the position that there are some propositions that we ought not believe or affirm, and that implies that the belief is distinct from the propositions believed.

Since some propositions occur to the mind with the feel characteristic of believed propositions, and since we ought

not to believe some such propositions, does it follow that it is equally within our power to acquiesce or not acquiesce in the truth of these propositions? For we normally think that "ought" implies "can". But it is a matter of identifying what the "can" applies to. And it seems that what we can or cannot do when we intuit a proposition with the feel characteristic of belief is assess the truth-value of such propositions. I do not mean that there need be a lengthy process of weighing evidence, although that may be called for. What we can do or fail to do is recall the credentials of a proposition. Once the credentials have been remembered, or even taken for granted (and that seems to be what we most commonly do), acquiescence in the proposition may be inevitable. Hence the assertion that some propositions that are brought to mind ought not to be believed, does not imply a freedom to believe. The freedom may lie elsewhere.

It has been argued that Hume's thesis about the nature of belief is true of a special sort of belief - those linked to perceptions or memories. Hume's account does not explain the nature of any belief e.g. my belief in the goodness of St. Francis or the existence of magnetic fields. Such beliefs are likely to be dispositions, and the beliefs that Hume's theory describes are conscious occurrences. But there may be some occurrent beliefs that are not related to present impressions e.g. judgments based on conclusions reached in the past. Price notes, as a further deficiency, that the Humean beliefs are all about particular events - about the individual things that we observe or remember. Hence Hume's account of belief is incapable of accounting for general beliefs of the form "All A's are B" or "Most A's are B."

## 2. Probability

It is not to my purpose to give a detailed exposition of Hume's views on probability. I will sketch his ideas and contrast them with Locke's.

Hume makes a distinction, as Locke does not, between probability of chances and probability of causes. [24] The former expression refers to the probability of an experiment having a given random outcome, like the face of a dice falling uppermost, and the latter refers to the probability that a cause will have a certain effect.

In discussing "the probability of chances" in both the Treatise and the Inquiry Hume takes as his example someone predicting which figure on a dice will fall uppermost, when he knows the proportion of faces carrying the figure to the faces that do not. Consequently, Hume is drawn to an "equi-probable" or "equi-possible" view of the nature of probability when it applies to chances. With a dice, we know what the total number of chances or possible outcomes is, and we know the proportion of "favourable" to "unfavourable" possibilities. The probability of a given possibility occurring is simply the ratio of favourable possibilities to the total number of possibilities. In fact, Hume does not make an arithmetical statement as definite as that, for he is more interested in explaining, on his psychological model, how "the superior number of equal chances operates on the mind" [25] to gain its assent. But he says that the "likelihood and probability of chances is a superior number of equal chances," [26] so it seems appropriate to interpret his position as I have done. [27]

There are some "universal laws" like the ones relating to the communication of motion by impulse and gravity which have "hitherto admitted of no exception." [28] Such laws, says Hume, are "free from doubt and uncertainty." [29]

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[24] See Inquiry. Section 6. Op.cit. pp 69-71. See Treatise. Op.cit. Book III, Part III, Sects. 11 & 12.

[25] T. P.127.

[26] ibid.

[27] See Inquiry. Op.cit. pp 69-70.

[28] Inquiry, op.cit. P.70

[29] T. P.124.

Locke thought that such laws were very highly probable.[30] Hume dismisses that view as "ridiculous."[31] He comments on Locke's view

> Mr Locke divides all arguments into "demonstrative" and "probable". In this view, we must say that it is only probable all men must die, or that the sun will rise tomorrow. But to conform our language more to common use, we ought to divide arguments into demonstrations, proofs and probabilities, by proofs, meaning such arguments from experience as leave no room for doubt or opposition. 32

It is rather curious that Hume does not say outright that we can be certain of these universal generalizations. He does everything but use the word "certain". Maybe he was still under the spell of the intuition of logical relations.

Thus according to Hume, when we learn of an event that is linked to another by a universal law, we can be certain of the occurrence of the other event. "Probability of causes" applies when a cause usually has a particular result, but not always - "nor has rhubarb always proved a purge, or opium a soporific." In such cases we "transfer" our experienced past to the future, in order to discern the frequency with which a result has accompanied a cause. The probability that in this case the result will occur depends on the frequency with which it has occurred in the past.

Evidently, Hume's account of probability is close to Locke's. But there are important differences. Hume is far more aware of what he is doing in probability judgments viz., transferring the observed past to the future (or the unobserved past or present for that matter). He is aware, unlike Locke, that he is presupposing the uniformity of nature, and that he is unable to justify that presupposition. Hume is greatly interested in causal relationships, which are included in the class of proofs.

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30 See Essay. 4.16.6.

31 T. P.124.

32 Inquiry op.cit. p.69. footnote.

He is particularly interested, unlike Locke, in inferences from particular causes to particular effects.

Perhaps the most important difference between Hume and Locke on probability arises from the evidence that each takes to be essential for the "class of proofs." For Locke, the evidence consists of "the constant observation of ourselves and _others in the like cases_." [33] That is, the testimony of others is included in the evidence. In the section in the _Inquiry_ on probability Hume is neutral on this point - he writes in the passive voice about "other causes which have been found more irregular and uncertain." [34] But in the _Treatise_, probability is discussed in terms of the effects that frequent observations produce on the individual mind. Once a conjunction between events has been uniformly observed, when the mind perceives or remembers one conjunct it proceeds automatically to believe in the existence of the other. When the conjunction has been less than fully uniform, the mind reflects on the frequency of past conjunctions, and the greater number of remembered instances fuse into the most powerful idea, or constitute a belief about what is going to happen. Evidently, the observations of others have no point of entry into this picture.

Incidentally, this mechanical model of belief shows why it is unnecessary to pursue in Hume's work the question of relation between probability _per se_ and credibility. For in Hume, it is simply the case that _past observations_ determine belief, either automatically as in the case of uniformly experienced conjunctions, or by the deliberate recall of the relative frequency of past instances.

In the _Treatise_ then, the observations of others do not count in determining probabilities. And Hume seems to imply, in his most developed treatment of testimony, that the experience of others is at best indirect evidence for universal laws. I shall take this point up in the next section.

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[33] _Essay_ 4.16.6.

[34] _Inquiry_ op.cit. P.70.

## 3. Testimony

In his writings on probability, Hume is not merely telling us how we do reason where probability is concerned. He is telling us what we ought to do if we want to reason properly. The rules he is enunciating emerge clearly in his writing on testimony in which, similarly, he is telling us how we ought to assess reports of witnesses. It is in what he says about testimony in the Essay on Miracles, that Hume departs furtherst from Locke, although their doctrines still have affinities.

To introduce his discussion, Hume alludes to a work of Dr Tillotson which shows, Hume says, that it is "directly contrary to the rules of just reasoning to give our assent" [35] to the doctrine of the Real Presence. Hume "flatters himself that he has discovered an argument of like nature ... which will be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion." [36] I will attempt to identify the rules of just reasoning he lays down. The first three state, in effect, that in reasoning about facts not perceptually present, we should adhere to the canons of probability.

1) We must proportion our belief to the evidence.
2) Those events "infallibly experienced" to be continued in a certain way in the past may be expected with full certainty to be continued in similar ways in the future.
3) Where events have been observed to be conjoined not universally but sometimes, then the relative frequency of the conjunctions should be noted, and on that we should base our confidence in the occurrence of an event once we have been given its conjunct.

Now it emerges that Hume considers that the testimony given by witnesses of the events that they have perceived and the truth of their reports is a conjunction which we find in our experience, just as is the presence of clouds

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[35] I. op.cit. P.116.

[36] I. op.cit. P.118.

and rain, or the conjunction of belligerent behaviour and combat. The doctrine is that the reports of witnesses don't bear any necessary relationship to the facts and that only experience can teach us what relation they do have to the facts. By checking on witnesses' reports I observe to what extent testimonies are correct. Hume writes:

> The reason why we place any credit in witnesses and historians is not derived from any connection which we perceive a priori between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them. 37

Locke's statement that in assessing testimony we should take into account the integrity and skill of the witnesses, [38] might suggest that he thought that we must have "found the conformity" between those characteristics and true reports. But Locke might not have intended that. He might merely have meant that the integrity and skill of the sources is itself a sufficient ground for inferring to their reliability as witnesses. Hume's innovation of including testimonies within relative frequencies puts him in the position where he can apply a numerical value to the probability that a testimony is true. But we ought to be wary of any attempt to do that, because the process of fitting the witness into a class is likely to be arbitrary in at least some respects. We can now formulate Hume's rule regarding testimony:

> Rule 4: We should proportion our assurance in a given testimony to the relative frequency with which we have found witnesses similar in character to the testifiers to give true reports rather than false ones.

This doctrine has the effect of making all probabilities relative to a person's own experience, for even the observations of others now come to a person with a probability based on a regularity he has experienced. I can indeed use the experience of others in forming my

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[37] I. op.cit. P.121. See also P.119.

[38] Essay 4.15.4.

beliefs about, say, the constitutions and properties of bodies, but since I have observed that even the best witnesses are sometimes mistaken, I would then have to be less than certain about the regularities in nature. If I do wish to be certain about them, it seems that I must rely solely on my own experience. But my own experience is so confined in time and place that it is doubtful whether I should ever be certain of a universal generalization on the basis of that alone. If I were to rely on my own experience, then there are some extremely well attested universal generalizations I could not accept, for sheer lack of the appropriate experience. For example, I have never seen a human being or an animal being born, hence I could not accept the generalization "all human beings are born of women." I accept the proposition completely on the testimony of others. Further, I am certain of it, even though I recognize that the testimonies of good witnesses are sometimes mistaken. Of course, my certainty in this case is due to the uniform testimonies of masses of men of all kinds. But even so, masses of men are composed of individuals, for any one of whom the correlation of a report being given and a report being true is not as uniform as a standard correlation in physical science, of which I am likewise certain.

It seems, then, that Hume can do one of two things, neither of which will provide him with certainty about the operations of nature. He can form his beliefs about uniformities in nature on the basis of his experience alone. That has the advantage that uncertainties do not have to be introduced to allow for what we have discovered in the past viz., that witnesses give false reports. But it has the disadvantage that an individual's experience may be very narrow, not only in that he has no experience of very common events like births and deaths, but in that he may have had very little experience of other equally common events like lead sinking in water, and certainly not enough experience of them to permit confident universal generalizations to be based on them. The other procedure is to draw on the experience of others in formulating generalizations. Hume does not believe that such procedures should result in certainty, although we have seen that they do.

Hume moves on to consider what we ought to do when reports of witnesses conflict with the regularities "we" have observed in nature. He writes:

> It is experience only which gives authority to human testimony, and it is the same principle which assures us of the laws of nature. When, therefore, these two kinds of experience are contrary, we have nothing to do but subtract the one from the other and embrace an opinion either on one side or the other with that assurance which arises from the remainder. 39

Paraphrased, that reads, perhaps

> Rule 5: Whenever a testimony conflicts with a law of nature believe whichever is most probable with a degree of assurance proportional to the extent that the one is more probable than the other.

Let us say that a witness of excellent character in superb health tells us that he saw an unsupported concrete slab that did not fall. Let us say also that we have counted the experience of others in coming to our views about what general laws there are. In this case, since the witness is of excellent character, there is a considerable probability that he is telling the truth. But the uniform experience of myself and others known to me makes it highly probable that the event did not happen. What we must now do, according to Hume, is subtract the one probability from the other. Hence we must continue to believe that all unsupported bodies fall, but with a confidence less than we had previously. If other equally good witnesses come forward with the same report it seems that our confidence that the event did not happen should steadily diminish. Hume has no account of how corroborating reports increase probabilities, hence it does not emerge from his writings how many or what kinds of report are required before we should admit that an exception to a law of nature has occurred.

The problem now becomes "what does this exception imply?" Should we abandon the general rule, modify it in some way, or say that the exception is due to some force

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39 I. op.cit. P.137.

outside nature? Hume does not face that question because he thinks that it will never arise. That is because he believes that the uniform experience against the exception to the natural laws provides a "proof" against it, and therefore any report that such an event has occurred can be rejected. But his sense of "proof" does not preclude the possibility of an exception turning up. And he has forgotten that there may be some probability that a witness is telling the truth, and because of that our confidence in the law ought to be reduced. Hume himself writes:

> Here is a contest of two opposite experiences, of which the one destroys the other as far as its force goes, and the superior can only operate on the mind by the force which remains. 40

Of course Hume does not acknowledge that we rely on the testimony of others in coming to decide what are laws of nature, but if he did acknowledge that, it follows on his theory about witnesses that we should be less than certain of laws of nature. Then, on his definition, laws of nature could not be used as a "proof" of anything.

The conclusion at which Hume believes that he has arrived, that he can ignore accounts of exceptions to natural laws, seems to imply that we should never alter our conception of a natural law. For any reported counter-instance could be rejected on the ground that there is uniform experience against it. Locke's Siamese king had no experience of water becoming solid when the temperature is lowered. In virtue of the uniform behaviour of cooled water in the King's experience, Hume presumably believes that he (the king) might dismiss the report of the first witness, and, for the same reason, any subsequent reports. But then any reported exception to a natural law would suffer the same fate. It might be replied that the King could check on the ambassador's story, if he really wanted to. But the point is that if Hume is right the man would have no reason to do any checking. C.D. Broad writes on this point:

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40 I. op.cit. P.121.

> My only motive for investigating alleged exceptions or trying to explain them is that the report of them has made me doubtful of the law. Yet, if the testimony of others does not shake my belief in the law, there is no reason for me to think that there is anything that needs explanation or investigation. 41

Of course, if I allow the report of the witness to reduce my confidence in the law, as Hume's general argument seems to require, I may come to believe, on the strength of reports of other witnesses, that that event took place and that similar ones took place.

These points against Hume do not establish that he would ever have to countenance that an event did violate natural laws i.e. was inexplicable by any of them. In a case where similar exceptions to known uniformities are reported by different observers at different places and times we might reject our old uniformities and espouse new ones. One can imagine the Siamese King reacting in that fashion when he heard other reports about the behaviour of freezing water. When a single exception is reported by several good witnesses there are at least two conceivable responses. We might lower our confidence in the general law, suspecting that a new law may be discovered which explains the phenomena. Or, if the errant phenomenon is an exception to a particularly well established law, and one which we are fairly sure is unlikely to be affected by conditions about which we are ignorant, like the law "all unsupported bodies fall", we could maintain our confidence in the law and hold that the exception is due to an unknown force. If that force were of a personal nature it might reveal something about itself, but if not, it would remain an unknown.

It is interesting to note that the application we made of Hume's principles to his own position regarding the certainty to be attached to general laws takes him back to Locke, who believed that general laws rise to the neighbourhood of certainty, although they should not

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41 Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. Vol. 17. 1916-17. P.87.

themselves be regarded as certain.[42] Hume, it will be remembered, dismissed that position as "ridiculous", and sided with the vulgar who are certain of general laws. It may be that Hume, had he reflected, would stay on the vulgar's side. But if he did, he would have to allow, with the rest of us, that testimony may legitimately lead to certainty. If he chose to do that, he would then have to do one of two things, both of which he resists doing. Firstly, he might say that although the occurrences of witnesses offering reports and the reports being true have not been universally conjoined in a given individual's experience, he can still be certain of a testimony. Or alternatively, Hume might cease to subject testimony to relative frequency considerations. The rule that we should do so is perhaps the most controversial that Hume lays down. I shall discuss it in the chapter on testimony.

## 4. Hume's Skepticism and His Rules of Just Reasoning

The five rules laid down above may be taken as a (perhaps partial) statement of Hume's ethics of belief. After all, they were meant to be rules of "just reasoning." But Hume comes to skeptical conclusions of a very fundamental kind in both the Inquiry and the Treatise. Yet, we remember, at the end of the Inquiry Hume's confidence in his principles is sufficient for him to make, on the basis of them, his energetic recommendation to burn the books. Cursory reading of the skeptical sections of the Inquiry and Treatise suggests that Hume resorts to prudential and/or pragmatic forms of justification. When he has argued for his skeptical conclusions, he then, it seems, offers motives for belief itself. If that is the case, he is thinking of belief as though it were an action. In order to see whether Hume does offer motives for belief, I will examine his skeptical writings.

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[42] Locke's reason for that view is that universal generalizations are not perceived to be true.

I begin with the Inquiry, since the drift of the argument is clearer there than in the Treatise. In the Inquiry, Hume argues

1) That we do not perceive bodies [43]
2) That there is no good reason to believe that there is anything external to our perceptions [44]
3) That beliefs about objects not present to the senses, other than memory beliefs, are based on a principle that we have no reason to think is true.

The principle is that "objects which have, in our experience, been frequently conjoined will likewise in other instances be conjoined in the same manner." [45] Hume also mentions some paradoxes which are said to arise from our concepts of space and time, but he doubts whether these paradoxes are well-founded.

Given these conclusions, what becomes of Hume's five principles? Hume does not address himself to that question since he thinks that the exigencies of life sufficiently subvert the "excessive skepticism" implied by the conclusions above. All that the skeptical arguments can do is throw us into "a momentary amazement and confusion" [46] which is soon "put to flight" [47] by the most trivial events in life." [48] One is distantly reminded of Santayana's dictum that "knowledge is faith mediated by symbols." That is suggested by Hume's position that the requirements of life overwhelm skepticism, but Hume's position does not imply anything as specific as Santayana's statement. Hume means nothing more than that whatever skeptical conclusions we may come to, we will carry on in the affairs of life very much as before.

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[43] Inquiry op.cit. P.161.

[44] Op.cit. P.161-162.

[45] Op.cit. P.167.

[46] Op.cit. P.168.

[47] ibid.

[48] ibid.

But not quite as before. Although Hume believes that the needs of life subvert "excessive skepticism", he thinks that a "mitigated skepticism" is desirable. The morals that we may draw from that are

1) That we ought not to be too sure of our opinions [49]
2) That we ought to restrict our enquiries to common life and mathematics. [50]

But Hume himself does not comply with these rules since, in disregard of the first, he loudly recommends the burning of books written from certain philosophical and religious points of view, and in conflict with the second, he expresses the conviction that philosophy ought to be pursued. He has the disclaimer that "philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected", [51] but that is scarcely true of his own philosophical researches.

But not only does Hume not comply with the canons of a mitigated skepticism, he makes no effort, beyond the above rules, to state what it consists of, and much more important, he makes no attempt to state how his rules of "just reasoning" stand in relation to it. For he is pleased to assert even in the section on mitigated skepticism, "that we cannot give a satisfactory reason why we believe, after a thousand experiments, that a stone will fall or a fire burn." [52] What now becomes of his rules about probable reasoning and testimony? And how are they affected by the conclusion that we have no sound reason to believe that material objects exist? These questions are simply left in the air.

The statement that action, employment and the occupations of common life subvert excessive skepticism is too general to commit Hume to any pragmatic or prudential justification for believing, so we must not expect to see

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[49] Op.cit. P.169-170.

[50] ibid.

[51] Op.cit. P.170.

[52] ibid.

freedoms to believe implied from that quarter. Now Hume seems to emerge all too easily from his skeptical arguments. Once they are subverted by the common affairs of life, it seems that all his previous conclusions are reinstated, together with some new ones in line with them which are suggested by skepticism. But even if it is true that the pressures of life make it impossible to accept the skeptical conclusions, they still stand, and it follows from them that we have no reason to believe that there are testifiers or that future correlations will be of the same type as those perceived in the past. Hence when we perceive smoke and believe fire to be present, or believe that we are in the company of a witness when we have certain impressions, it is fair to describe our state as one of faith (the belief) mediated by symbols (the impressions). But are the pressures of life so great that we must <u>believe</u> that testifiers exist and that unexperienced conjunctions will be like experienced ones? Surely not. Why should not a person <u>act as though</u> there are testifiers and as though what has not been experienced is like what has been experienced, without affirming that these are the case? Such a person would be like an agnostic member of a religious household, who, in order to placate those he lives with, goes through all the motions of a believer, but does not believe in God. Since there is a tendency for beliefs to fall in line with actions, the skeptic would be under greater pressure than the agnostic to believe, since he is constantly acting as though certain propositions were true. Consequently, such a skeptic might wonder whether withholding belief was worth the effort. He might decide to overlook his principles and continue believing. This would be a choice to continue believing rather than to cease believing.

Hume's skeptical arguments are much more fully developed in the <u>Treatise</u>, and his reactions to skepticism are more emotional and less well defined than in the <u>Inquiry</u>. Hume argues that if we view any sort of reasoning in its proper perspective, we shall see that there is implied "a total extinction of belief and evidence." [53]

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[53] T. P.183.

But "nature by an uncontrollable necessity has determined us to judge as well as to breathe and feel." [54] The existence of bodies, Hume argues, cannot be inferred from our perceptions, nor can it be based on philosophical argument. [55] But although we have no evidence that bodies exist, we cannot help believing that they do. "Nature has not left this to our choice," [56] he says.

Once again, Hume's reaction to these skeptical conclusions is disappointing. Since the skeptical arguments are irrefragable, Hume thinks that we ought to be "diffident" in our opinions, and since some sort of speculative activity is inevitable, we ought to undertake it with some guide, and he recommends philosophy, since that is less likely to lead us to harm than any other. But given his conclusions about reason, Hume has no grounds for relying on argument at all. And he does not attempt to reconcile his continuing trust in argument with skepticism.

The references to nature overcoming our doubts might make us suspect that there are pragmatic arguments operating. But that is not so. It is simply that nature exacts a submission from us which we are powerless to withhold. Hume makes no attempt to save from skepticism any of the conclusions he had come to before the skeptical passages. Passmore, contrasting Berkeley with Hume, comments on Hume's consistency

> In many ways, Berkeley had the more philosophical mind; he was prepared to work out a hypothesis in detail, with a real concern for consistency - Hume in contrast, was a philosophical puppy-dog, picking up and worrying one problem after another, always leaving his teeth marks in it, but casting it aside when it threatened to become wearisome. 57

But although we cannot infer from any of Hume's reactions to skepticism that he ever offers motives for

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54 ibid.

55 T. P.187.

56 ibid.

57 J.A. Passmore. Humes Intentions. Duckworth. Paperback, 1968, P.87.

belief rather than evidence in support of propositions, he occasionally uses language which makes it look as though he is thinking of belief as though it were an action. In one place, he asks "What party, then, shall we choose among these difficulties?" [58] Here he is writing of a decision whether to trust reason or the imagination. This is not a choice to believe, but it is a choice that would result in some beliefs rather than others. But, on reflection, Hume does not see this as a real choice, and is content to leave the difficulty "seldom or never thought of."

A more promising example of a decision to believe can be found in a statement that occurs near the end of the section "Of Skepticism with Regard to the Senses" where Hume says "I feel myself at present ... more inclin'd to repose no faith at all in my senses." [59] Hume is looking back at the arguments which, he thought, showed conclusively that there is no justification for belief in material objects, and <u>when</u> he has those arguments in mind he is inclined to withhold faith in the senses. Well why not suspend belief in them then? The answer seems to be that suspending belief is pointless - "carelessness and inattention" will, in a few minutes, re-establish trust in the senses.

What Hume is supposing that it is within his power to do or not to do is "repose faith in" observations. Is that the same as having it equally within one's power to believe or not believe something? In this case, surely, such a freedom is implied. Hume is saying that it is equally within his power to believe or not believe that he is sensing material objects. This is, of course, different from accepting arguments to the conclusion that we do not perceive material objects. Hume simply found the arguments to that conclusion decisive. And while he recalls them he feels it to be within his power to withhold belief from the senses. What makes him doubt that that is worth doing is

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[58] T. P.268.

[59] T. P.217. Hume's emphasis.

his belief that the decision will be rendered inoperative as soon as he forgets about the skeptical arguments and becomes inattentive. But then and there he could withhold belief, and view the objects of his observations as purely private presentations. There is nothing to prevent him, except that he thinks that the suspension of belief is pointless, since it will be short-lived. It seems, then, that here Hume regulates his belief in accordance with a motive.

# CHAPTER 4. W.K. CLIFFORD

## 1. W.K. Clifford and the Freedom to Believe

In his article The Ethics of Belief [1] W.K. Clifford is interested in the morality of belief, and in belief per se not at all. It is in this article that Clifford makes the famous statement

> It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. 2

Surely, we might reason, if it is wrong to believe P then we ought not to believe P. And if we ought not to believe P when we do not have sufficient evidence, then it seems that it is equally within our power to believe as not to believe P. For, if we could not help believing or not believing when we found that we had insufficient evidence, there would be no point in laying down what we ought to do when that contingency arises. It seems then, that although Clifford does not discuss belief itself, he is committed to some sort of freedom with respect to it. I shall examine The Ethics of Belief to determine the point at which the 'ought', implied by Clifford's conclusion above, applies.

Clifford argues by analyzing and drawing conclusions from two examples which are favourable to his case. I will consider only one example, since the other is essentially similar. Clifford describes a ship-owner who had insistent doubts about the sea-worthiness of his ship. Instead of checking to find out whether the ship was sea-worthy or not, he restricted his attention to evidence that showed that it probably was sea-worthy. He reminded himself that the vessel had weathered many storms in the past and hence that it was likely to come through the next one it encountered. In addition, he convinced himself that it was ungenerous to the ship-builders to entertain

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[1] W.K. Clifford, Lectures and Essays. Macmillan, London, 1879.

[2] Op.cit. P.186.

the belief that the ship they built might founder, and he put his trust in Providence who would surely protect the emigrant families that the ship was to carry to the new land. Nevertheless, the ship went down in mid-ocean with all passengers and crew. [3]

Clifford says that the owner was guilty of the deaths of the people on the ship. Clifford admits that the man was convinced of the sea-worthiness of the vessel, but emphasizes that he had no right to believe on the strength of the evidence he had. [4] Clifford asks us to imagine that instead of sinking, the ship made the voyage in safety, and many others after it. Would the owner be any the less guilty? 'Not one jot', asserts Clifford. 'The man would not have been innocent, he would only have been not found out.' [5] But the owner cannot now be guilty of the deaths of those on the ship, because we are supposing that it did not go down. Clifford seems not to notice the point of difference between the two cases. But he tells us that what the man is guilty of in each case is acquiring a belief in an illicit manner:

> The question of right and wrong has to do with the origin of his belief, not the matter of it; not what it was, but how he got it. 6

So the condemnation is of <u>the way in which</u> the belief was acquired. And this is obviously the moral that the story about the ship-owner is meant to convey. What is wrong is the set of activities that leads to the acquisition of the belief. Clifford writes

> ... inasmuch as he (the ship-owner) had knowingly and willingly worked himself into that frame of mind (the belief) he must be held responsible for it. 7

It would have been right for him to undertake a detailed investigation of the condition of his vessel, and, Clifford

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[3] Op.cit. P.178.

[4] ibid.

[5] ibid.

[6] ibid.

[7] ibid.

will argue, wrong for him to pursue any other method of forming beliefs. The title Clifford gives to the first section of his article 'The Duty of Inquiry' is a better statement of the obligation he is arguing for than in his celebrated conclusion.

Had Clifford been invited to, he might have re-cast his conclusion in the following form: 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to form beliefs (other than perceptual and memory beliefs) except by impartial investigation and test.' That is really the moral that his case-studies support, as can be seen from his other example, where he concludes, pointing to the evil done '... Sincere convictions, instead of being honestly earned by patient inquiring, were stolen by listening to the voice of prejudice and passion.' [8] But even if Clifford accepted the reformulation above, he would have to recognize that belief, even following investigation and test, might be premature. Consequently, he would still want to say 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence' in order to prescribe against people believing before investigation and test provide them with sufficient evidence. And even when the investigation is finished, Clifford would maintain that a person ought not to believe if the investigation has not produced sufficient evidence.

What powers do these directives to withhold belief imply? When we are conducting an enquiry we may discover a substantial body of evidence for P, but we may still not have settled the questions of how strong the connection between the evidence and P is, nor whether there are strong arguments that can be levelled against P. Clifford would enjoin us not to "close" on the evidence until we are satisfied about these points. Until we have done that, we cannot be said to have sufficient evidence for P. The rule implied here is that we ought to properly complete an enquiry before we believe. When the enquiry is finished it may be that we have some evidence for P, or it may be

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[8] Op.cit. P.179.

that we have none. Clifford's injunction not to believe until there is sufficient evidence applies most obviously to the latter case. If there is some evidence for P, we cannot help, as we attend to it, having some belief in P. If we recognize that there is only a fair amount of evidence, we cannot, then and there, claim P as true with full assurance. So Clifford's prescription to withhold belief cannot apply in this sort of situation. But after we have examined the evidence and proceeded to other things the situation changes, and we become subject to all kinds of pressures from the environment and from within (for example, moods of depression and elation) that can affect our confidence. It is in these situations that restraint with respect to assurance is called for. So when the enquiry is done, Clifford's rule comes to the prescription not to believe when there is no evidence, and, when we are no longer considering the evidence, to proportion our assurance to the amount of evidence.

Some of Clifford's expressions indicate that he has fairly explicit ideas about believing being subject to choice. He uses the following interesting locution

> ... when a man's belief is so fixed that he cannot think otherwise ... [9]

obviously implying that he thinks that not all our beliefs are that fixed. He admonishes us not to "let ourselves believe for unworthy reasons" [10] and urges us to exercize "scrupulous care and self-control in the matter of belief." [11]

All these locutions can be construed so as not to imply any freedom to believe. To take the first quotation, it may be that even if the belief could be changed, the change might not be within the person's control. The other quotations could be construed as exhortations to be alert,

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[9] Op.cit. P.180.

[10] Op.cit. P.185.

[11] Op.cit. P.188.

in order to prevent our belief being determined by reasons other than evidence without our being aware of it. Since these interpretations are possible, we cannot say that Clifford explicitly entertains a freedom to believe thesis. But there are more obvious interpretations of these locutions which do imply such a freedom. The warning not to let ourselves believe for unworthy reasons might be referred to acceptance-reactions, and would then imply that we can check spontaneous inclinations to believe. The prescription to exercize care and self-control in the matter of belief might be extended to a person who was tempted to come to a conclusion that was flattering to him. This case will be revisited in the second to last chapter in the examination of an argument of Roy Edgley's.

## 2. Clifford on the Morality of Acquiring Belief

Clifford has curious and interesting arguments for the thesis that investigation and test are the only 'right' methods of acquiring beliefs. These arguments also support the doctrine that we should regulate our beliefs according to the strength of the evidence. Consequently, I shall look into his arguments.

Clifford's ship-owner had arrived at his belief about the sea-worthiness of his vessel 'by suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation.' [12] It was wrong for him to do that because the belief he came to was of great importance to other men - in this case the passengers and crew of the ship. But then, says Clifford, all the beliefs that we hold are important to others, since they all affect mankind. This claim has some plausibility, since many of the beliefs we have influence us in our capacities as social beings. Whether all our beliefs do, is rather more doubtful. But how does the fact that many of our beliefs affect what we

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[12] Op.cit. P.182.

are qua social being go to show that some ways of acquiring beliefs are wrong?

Clifford has three arguments for this contention. Firstly, some methods of belief-formation have a fragmentary effect on society, and hence are harmful to it. For example, partial examination of the evidence, and taking heed of the promptings of self-interest, involve individual preference and hence may result in beliefs which mark a believer off from his fellows. If beliefs are commonly acquired in this fashion, they will be a divisive influence. Certain other methods of acquiring beliefs 'help to bind men together, and to strengthen and direct their common action'. [13] Such is the case with 'long experience' and 'free and fearless questioning' in which, presumably, anyone can participate. Clifford might have said, in the spirit of this argument, that since beliefs are public property, the methods of obtaining them should likewise be public. And since investigation and test are public they are legitimate determinants of belief. Clifford says in this connexion:

> It is in this way (verification) that the (belief) becomes common property, a right object of belief, which is a social affair and matter of public business. 14

Clifford is of the opinion that right and wrong are determined by reference to the social group only:

> In the first place, right is an affair of the community, and must not be referred to anything else. 15

Clifford adheres to a version of evolutionary ethics. On his view, an activity is wrong if it threatens the survival of society. If some of the activities that constitute belief formation result in separating individuals from society, then they are, to that extent, breaking up the coherence of that society. (Of course,

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[13] Op.cit. P.183.

[14] Op.cit. P.197.

[15] From the article Right and Wrong op.cit. P.171.

additional argument is required to show that pluralizing society in this sense is a threat to its survival). Given what Clifford takes to be the determinant of right and wrong, the effect of certain processes of belief-formation viz. that they put an individual in possession of true beliefs, ceases to be of over-riding importance. Clifford writes

> There are no self regarding virtues properly so called; those qualities which tend to the advantage and preservation of the individual being only morally right in so far as they make him a more useful citizen. 16

Consequently, the thesis that some ways of acquiring beliefs are wrong because they result in false beliefs, is not a central part of Clifford's argument, although it is a part. [17] And that is the second argument against certain ways of coming to believe - that they lead to error. But no sooner has that been stated than Clifford moves to "a greater and wider evil" [18] which follows when a man believes without sufficient evidence - "a credulous character is maintained and supported." Clifford expands at length on the disastrous social consequences of this condition: fraud will be encouraged, as will lying and cheating. Under the stress of these vices, Society will tend to disintegrate.

The Ethics of Belief is a polemical article, as can be seen from the following statement:

> If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call in question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it - the life of that man is one long sin against mankind. 19

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[16] Op.cit. P.172.

[17] Op.cit. P.185.

[18] ibid.

[19] Op.cit. 186-7.

Clifford's objective is to demonstrate that those who do not regulate their judgment solely in accordance with the evidence are seriously at fault morally. That is what he is arguing for, and that is why it is not his purpose to emphasize simply that certain sorts of belief formation lead to error. Although his conclusion 'it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence' reminds us strongly of Locke, the reasons that Clifford gives for it would have surprised Locke. According to Clifford, it is evil for a man to believe without sufficient evidence, because if he does so he tends to fragment society. Locke, in contrast, thought that we should proportion our assent to the evidence because that is the only method of attaining truth, which is a good in itself.

There is no doubt that Clifford has drawn our attention to an important moral dimension of belief. But we might ask, inspired by his own arguments, whether we ought to accept the conclusions we ascribed to him. For it is unclear whether we have sufficient evidence for them. Could anyone have sufficient evidence for a conclusion like 'It is wrong always, everywhere and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'?

We may also be worried by another aspect of the general nature of Clifford's injunctions. We might press the question of whether all beliefs and the processes of acquiring them need be assessed morally, since some beliefs seem to be pretty harmless. Take the belief of a football enthusiast that the team he supports is going to win the next match. That belief may very well not be supported by sufficient evidence, and the belief may well divide its holder from his fellows. Do we want to say that it is therefore morally wrong for him to hold it? Perhaps Clifford would answer in the affirmative, on the ground that such a belief manifests credulity which may be reinforced by elements in society for their own ends - fraud and cheating will be encouraged, and so on. That, surely, would be taking morality a bit too seriously. It may well be that total morality of this sort contravenes the canons

of evolutionary ethics, for it is pretty certain that if morality were pushed that far, society would soon cease to be 'closely knit together'.

Even if we allow Clifford's injunctions to apply to any belief whatever, they may still conflict with other duties that may over-ride them. A man may feel that he has a duty to trust his wife's integrity, and as a result, he may feel that he must ignore evidence that she has betrayed him. Again, a man may have a duty to his dependents to believe that a medicine will cure him, if that is likely to increase his chances of recovery. Clifford might contest these examples with arguments drawn from evolutionary ethics. If so, we should have to dispute the merits of that.

Clifford argued that it is wrong to believe except when there is sufficient evidence, because he was convinced that arriving at beliefs on other bases tends to fragment society. But is it clear that adherence to investigation and test will have opposite results? A glance at the history of Bertrand Russell suggests not. But Russell was an exception in a largely conservative society. If each individual made investigation and test into personal habits would that unify society and give it a common direction? Prima facie, the answer is "no", since it is likely that a diversity of beliefs would result and that climates of opinion would be overthrown. (A surer way (perhaps) of achieving a unified society would be to require each individual to acquiesce in widely held opinions or in state opinions.) Now a society might be unified in that its members all accept investigation and test as the only methods of acquiring beliefs. But whether that would have results that unified or fragmented society is far from clear.

We have seen then that Clifford's moral conclusions can be challenged on evidential grounds, and that the universality of these conclusions can be challenged on prudential and moral grounds. We have seen too that it is unclear whether or not the application of Clifford's own rules would fragment society.

## 3. Clifford on Testimony and the Weight of Authority

Clifford asks 'Under what circumstances is it lawful to believe on the authority of others?' [20] In order to have the 'right' to accept a man's testimony, says Clifford, we must have 'reasonable grounds' for each of the following:

1. For trusting the man's veracity, that he is really trying to speak the truth so far as he knows it.
2. For trusting the man's knowledge, that he has had opportunities of knowing the truth about this matter.
3. For trusting the man's judgment, that he has made proper use of these opportunities in coming to the conclusion which he affirms. [21]

Clifford is here laying down the conditions for legitimate acceptance of testimony. Later in the article he discusses the conditions which justify acceptance of particular kinds of authority. Although Clifford is concerned to tell us when we ought to rely on testimony he does not say what a testimony or a witness is. Now I take it that the convention is that a man is described as a witness (usually an eye-witness) only insofar as he testifies about what he has observed. Consequently, what a man sees, hears, smells or feels he can testify about or is a witness to. I take it that an authority is some person (or institution) who is in a position to know about a certain subject. Consequently, a witness is a particular kind of authority - one who is in a position to know <u>because</u> of what he observed. Clifford seems to work with these distinctions, although he tends at times to overlook the distinctions between a witness and an authority.

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[20] Op.cit. P.189.

[21] ibid.

Clifford does not argue for the three canons above. He considers them "plain and obvious" [22] and thinks that "no man of ordinary intelligence, reflecting on the matter, could fail to arrive at them." [23] (I shall advance different reasons for relying on testimony in the final chapter.) Now the section on "The Weight of Authority" is packed with argument, but much of it is directed against the positions

1. That the excellent moral character of a man is evidence that he is a reliable witness.
2. That evidence that Mohammed is a great ethical and social thinker is evidence that he had some sort of divine revelation.

The innocent reader will be astonished by 2. But in "The Weight of Authority" Clifford is engaged in a series of vigorous cavalry charges against religious belief. His stated target is Mohammed, but that, surely, is only a smoke screen. The camp of the enemy is much closer to home. Nevertheless, 2. above is an instance of a general question which arises in the justification of authority - whether or not the known high intellectual performance of a man in one field makes him any sort of authority in another. In fact this question is confused in Clifford's presentation, because the problem as it arises there is whether a man's high intellectual performance makes him a reliable witness. However I shall deal with 1. first.

The point Clifford wishes to make there is that the excellent moral character of a man is evidence that he is not lying, but is not evidence that he has exercized sound judgment. (That is, good moral character is evidence for Clifford's first canon but not the others.) Of course there is no necessary connection between excellence of moral character and soundness of judgment. To illustrate, we might imagine a man who was reared in and lived all his life in a Hindu culture. Such a man may be scrupulously

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[22] Op.cit. P.190.

[23] ibid.

honest and sincere, but his imagination rather than his judgment may be behind a good deal of what he says. But although there is no necessary connection between excellence of moral character and soundness of judgment, there may be a contingent connection. In some circles in a society to make assertions only when one has sufficient support for them may be considered an indication of strength of character. Consequently, when a person of "excellent moral character" from such a circle tells us of something he has witnessed, we would have some reason to believe that wnat he says is true. Of course, we should have to be careful. Appearances sometimes deceive, and individuals are occasionally subject to stresses and motives which may make their behaviour atypical.

In fairness to Clifford, it must be pointed out that if we did know that a person was of excellent moral character and from a society which held it to be part of a person's moral excellence to make assertions only when he had good evidence, then we would have "reasonable grounds" for Clifford's second and third conditions. There is a related point to be made here. A witness may be from a society whose values we have little or no information about. But our dealings with this person may convince us that he is the kind of person that we already know would not make unfounded statements. In his case, therefore, knowledge of his character would give us reason to trust not only his veracity, but that there is something in what he says.

I turn now to Mohammed. There is no need to spend much time on the point here. It is obvious that the known fact that X is a great ethical and social thinker provides no ground for inferring that X had a divine revelation, or even that X is an especially competent authority on religious matters.

But Clifford seems sometimes to suggest that evidence that X is a considerable thinker is never evidence that X is a sound witness. Well, great thinkers are sometimes short-sighted or deaf, but if we know that X is a man of intellectual stature, that, surely, is some evidence that he is a trustworthy witness. Clifford is interested specifically in Mohammed's testimony to the effect that he

had a divine revelation. It goes without saying that this is a testimony of an "observation" of a rather special sort, and special questions have to be asked about it. Clifford asks how we can know that Mohammed was not deluded, or over-impressed by figments of his imagination",[24] and he asks how Mohammed could have known that he was not dreaming.[25] These are very large questions, and it is not part of the business of this thesis to answer them. But to the last question at least, Clifford has an answer, and it is worth putting it down:

> The physical universe which I see and feel, and infer, is just my dream and nothing else; that which you see is your dream; only it so happens that all our dreams agree in many respects. This doctrine of Berkeley's has now so far been confirmed by the physiology of the senses, that it is no longer a metaphysical speculation, but a scientifically established fact. 26

Clifford supposes that a celestial-seeming visitor came to him and gave him information which he subsequently verified, and which enabled him to prove that the visitor had "means of knowledge about verifiable matters far exceeding my own." Clifford says

> This would not justify me in believing what he said about matters that are not at present capable of verification by man 27

although, says Clifford, we might legitimately believe what the visitor says about things that we could, but have not verified. In this case it might seem that Clifford is an over-cautious believer. If we know that the visitor has knowledge of verifiable matters far exceeding ours, surely we could have some trust in any of his pronouncements. But Clifford has a valuable point. The

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[24] Op.cit. P.192.

[25] Op.cit. P.191.

[26] Right and Wrong op.cit. P.142.

[27] The Ethics of Belief op.cit. P.193.

visitor has only established himself as an authority about verifiable matters. How do we know that he has any knowledge beyond them?

Could there be any reason for believing, however slightly, what he says about matters unverifiable by us? Now on the basis of the checking Clifford supposes he did, he found that the visitor had means of knowledge about verifiable matters far exceeding his own. Clifford was then prepared to believe what the visitor told him about such matters, even though Clifford had not himself verified these statements. So Clifford must have been satisfied about the visitor's honesty. Now if the visitor were honest and we knew that he had means of knowledge of verifiable matters far exceeding ours, and he made assertions which were not of a sort that we could verify, we could put some measure of trust in what he said even though we had not established that he was an authority about things we are unable to verify. This would be an example of moral character and an extraordinary knowledge establishing the reliability of an authority.

Clifford pursues the study of authority by considering the case of a chemist telling a person the result of a reaction. In order to be justified in accepting the chemist's statement, the recipient of it need not "actually verify it, or even see any experiment which goes towards verifying it." [28] As long as the person knows nothing that goes against the chemist's character or judgment, says Clifford, he is justified in believing what the chemist tells him. "His (the chemist's) authority is valid", says Clifford, "because there are those who question and verify it." [29]

I do not wish to contest Clifford's position here. But it is useful for us to note that many people must rely on testimony in order to know that there are other scientists who question and verify. That is, they must rely on

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[28] Op.cit. P.197

[29] ibid.

testimony for their conviction that others are in a position to know the truth of the chemist's statement. A point of greater philosophical interest suggested by Clifford's discussion of authority is that the grounds for relying on an authority may be quite diverse, according to the nature of the authority and the circumstances of those depending on it. This is illustrated by the two cases studied so far. We may take another example. The authority attaching to scientific statements in general may not justify the chemist's colleagues in accepting his statements. According to their circumstances, they may have to know how the results were obtained, and whether the chemist's equipment was capable of yielding the results claimed.

A further illustration of the thesis that the reasons for relying on authorities may (legitimately) be diverse can be found in what Clifford says about the evidence we have for the siege of Syracuse in the Peloponnesian war.[30] Our evidence consists of Thucydides' history. Clifford points out that later historians mention that Thucydides lived at the time of the war, and hence, presumably, was in a position to hear from witnesses about the events in it. Clifford points out too that our general experience of human nature tells us that men do not forge history books without a special motive, and that we "observe" in Thucydides' case that no such motive is present.

Now qua reliability as historians, Thucydides' successors present the same evidential problem to us as does Thucydides himself. Consequently, our sole reason for believing him would seem to rest on what we know about human nature in general. But we have other evidence as well. We may take it that had there been many serious falsehoods in Thucydides work, subsequent knowledge would somehow have brought them to light. Archaeological findings about towns, artifacts and land use, ethnological studies, and the traditions of the local people provide a body of knowledge in relation to which Thucydides' account

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[30] Op.cit. P.208.

might well be incompatible. And no such incompatibilities have been discovered. As Clifford says, historical "facts" are more precarious than the findings of the exact sciences, but we do attach some belief to them. And evidently, our reasons for accepting Thucydides as an authority are quite different from the reasons for accepting the chemist as an authority.

I have developed the point that there may be different grounds for accepting authorities because of the light that this may throw on the grounds for accepting testimony. A witness is a particular kind of authority. If there are diverse grounds for relying on authorities who are not witnesses, that is reason to suspect that there may be diverse grounds for relying on witnesses. I shall develop this point in my chapter on testimony.

## CHAPTER 5. WILLIAM JAMES: THE WILL TO BELIEVE

"Charity believeth all things"
1 Corinthians Ch.13 v.7.
King James version.

In the introductory paragraph of The Will to Believe, James writes that he is presenting ...

> ... an essay in justification of faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced. 1

It was found in the study of Locke that our intellect may be coerced when the evidence is simply overwhelming - as for example it is for the proposition that the South Vietnamese forces made a thrust into Laos in 1971. But when we have a body of evidence that is not so obviously massive, and when we recognize that there is a strong connection between the evidence and the conclusion and that there is no likelihood of there being further contrary evidence, then the evidence is similarly coercive. And this is true even when the evidence is slight. We are then determined to some belief in P, even if the degree of belief amounts to little more than a suspicion. And when it is not so clear that there is no more to be said against P, and when the connection between the evidence and the conclusion is not so obvious, but we nevertheless decide to accept the evidence, we are likewise determined by it to some degree of belief in P.

So if our "merely logical intellect" has not been coerced, it follows that we do not recognize any hard and fast evidence for P. In the case that we recognize that P is probable in relation to some propositions, we have not yet assented to P, and are holding off to see if there is other relevant evidence. Hence we may be in this sort of situation, yet it is still true that our logical intellect has not been coerced. But here we do not recognize evidence for P. And in fact James does not mention any

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[1] William James. The Will to Believe in The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy. Dover Publications. New York. 1956. P.1.

evidence for the religious hypothesis, and his paper suggests that he is happy to proceed under the assumption that there is none. Thus even if we have complied with the duty of inquiring into the truth of religion, but have turned up no evidence, we may still believe according to James. He suggests a contrast with science:

> It is only truth as technically - verified that interests (science). The truth of truths might come in a merely affirmative form, and she would decline to touch it. 2

James argues that we have a right to "affirm" the basic propositions of religion.

Evidently, James is committed to the view that we can choose to believe at least some things. But he does not think that we can choose to believe whatever we like. He makes two points: Firstly, we cannot believe the contradictory of whatever we know is true. For example, we cannot believe that we are well when we are miserably sick in bed, and we cannot believe that we have one hundred dollars in our pockets when we know that we have only two. Now there is some other restriction on the freedom we have to believe besides this. For we don't know that the contradictory of "It's raining on Jupiter" is true, or that the contradictory of "There are underground water-tables in Chad" is true, but we cannot believe these propositions. James would agree. He says that such propositions are not "live hypotheses" to us.

This is an important point, since those who are of the opinion that we have no freedom to believe commonly say that if we are free to believe then we ought to be able to believe propositions of the kind we have just mentioned, and they take our inability to do this to prove their point. What, then, is a "live hypothesis"? James says that a "live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed." [3] The phrase "real possibility" may suggest that evidence is needed, but

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[2] Op.cit. P.21.

[3] Op.cit. P.2.

the rest of the paper makes it plain that James does not intend that. James uses metaphors to clarify his meaning: live hypotheses are those that make "an electric connection with our nature","they scintillate with credibility." [4] James says that the measure of liveness of a hypothesis is an individual's willingness to act on it. We might know of someone else that a hypothesis is live for him by noting his readiness to act, and we would know how live it was to ourselves by feeling drawn to the proposition, which would involve being ready to act on it. But how could we feel drawn to P if we knew that we have no evidence for it?

James mentions "factors of belief" [5] such as "fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of caste and set." Clement of Alexandria observed that the opponents of Christianity had alleged that Christians' belief arose from fear, presumably the fear of what might happen to them in case they refused to believe. Clement countered that Christians believed out of love, meaning perhaps that they believed because they loved the person of Christ or the whole of the Christian scheme. In these cases, fear and love "light up our sleeping magazines of faith." [6] James mentions other "factors of belief" that function similarly e.g. imitation and partisanship. Anyone who has enjoyed the company of women will realize how often the desire to imitate makes hypotheses "live" for them. To illustrate how prejudice and partisanship may function in the same way, we might imagine an ardent racialist being told a disparaging story about a prominent coloured public figure. The racialist may well feel disposed to believe the story. James believes that what makes some christians Catholics rather than Protestants is that they desire <u>richness</u> in their religious scheme, not just literal truth and logical order.[7] If James is correct, he has identified another property that would make hypotheses live to a person. So although

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[4] ibid.

[5] Op.cit. P.9.

[6] ibid.

[7] William James. <u>The Varities of Religious Experience.</u> Fontana Paperback. P.440.

it is difficult to define "liveness", it is not hard to see what James means by it.

In many cases in which "the sleeping magazines of faith" are lit up by a "belief factor", the people concerned will not be aware that they are believing. They will be giving what Newman calls "simple assents", hence they would not be free to believe. But someone may be aware of the nature of what attracts him to the proposition, yet allow himself to believe. Such acquiescence involves a decision to believe. But this sort of decision is not the result of prior reflection and deliberation. A man simply allows himself to yield to belief. But James offers a different sort of example of a decision to believe, and one much closer to the sort of decision he is condoning in The Will to Believe. He writes:

> Our belief in truth itself, for instance, that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other, - what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up? 8

James concedes that he believes that experiment, studies and discussions bring us closer to the truth, but he says that when the skeptic asks how we know all this there is no rational answer to be given: "It is just one volition against another". Now very few laymen or philosophers will ever have chosen to believe in evidence, or affirmed that we can know the truth in full consciousness that there is ultimately no base for this affirmation. But James takes himself to have done so, and it may well be that he has.

However, even this may be challenged, for James' certainly is an extreme position. He believes that we never know when we know except in the case that what is claimed as knowledge is the present phenomenon of consciousness, or an "abstract proposition of comparison

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8 Will to Believe. Op.cit. P.9.

(such as 'two and two are the same as four')." [9] Apart from instances of these sorts, he says, we never know that what we claim is true. It might be questioned whether even James could believe that. Could James fail to know, when he was on the tip of a diving-board, that the next step forward would take him into empty space? But someone who believed that there is no justification for believing in external objects or that the future will be like the past could maintain that no one knows that proposition. Conceivably, many people might be brought to agree with James, hence they might, in full consciousness, simply affirm that we can know truth, but for the exceptions marked by James. To put the point in James' colourful language, they might deliberately "pin their faith" both in the existence of truth and that they gain an even better position towards it "by continuing to roll up (their) experiences and think." [10]

It is interesting to note that in these "skeptical" passages James seems to be arguing directly against Newman. In denying that we know that we know, he uses one of Newman's images, that of a clock striking when the hands reach the hour. There is no bell struck to tell us when we know, he says. Later he takes up a weaker form of this metaphor:

> Not an absolutist among them seems ever to have considered that the trouble may all the time be essential, and that the intellect, even with truth directly in its grasp, may have no infallible signal for knowing whether it be truth or no. [11]

And James states the doctrine he is rejecting in Newman's terminology: "certitude" is a mistaken ideal, he says, and he holds that there is but one "indefectibly certain truth", [12] although he later admits "abstract propositions of comparison."

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[9] Op.cit. P.15.

[10] Op.cit. P.17.

[11] Op.cit. P.16.

[12] Op.cit. P.14.

Now that James has established that "our passional nature" influences our opinions, how does he defend, against Clifford, the right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters? First, he says that in scientific matters we can always afford to wait for the evidence, so there is no point in adopting a believing attitude.[13] But in other cases, too much is lost by waiting for evidence. It is better to believe there and then. James says that there is no evidence that determines us to adopt a moral point of view, and that as far as evidence is concerned, moral scepticism is just as reasonable as any moral view. Adopting a moral point of view is not for James merely a matter of committing oneself to a programme of action. Belief is involved, he says: "The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will."[14] James refers to the case of the suitor as one in which waiting for evidence may be an ill-conceived policy. If the suitor decides to believe that the beloved loves him, James alleges, he vastly increases the chances that she will. So evidently it is to his advantage to believe. The situation is not that the suitor knows that at present the girl doesn't love him. If he knew that he couldn't believe that she did love him. But if he realized that she was wavering he might reason that if he believes that she loves him, and lets her see this, then that will contribute to getting her to love him. "How many women's hearts are vanquished by the mere sanquine insistence of some man that they must love him! he will not consent to the hypothesis that they cannot."[15] On the basis of this and similar cases, James concludes:

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[13] In fact James says that we can afford to wait until "objective evidence" (P.20) has come. But he has argued that we have no way of recognizing what that is. He should have said "... wait until we have experiences which, we take it, confirm the hypothesis."

[14] Op.cit. pp.22-3.

[15] Op.cit. P.24.

> There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. And where faith in a fact can help create the fact, that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the "lowest kind of immorality" into which a thinking being can fall. 16

The step to the defence of voluntary adoption of relgiious belief is now small. James says that "we are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose by our non-belief, a certain vital good." [17] This being so, it is to our advantage to believe here and now. It is not that believing itself has good consequences, irrespective of the truth or falsity of what is believed. We gain in believing only in case the religious hypothesis is true. James seems to be saying that there is at least this good to be gained, that we put ourselves in possession of the truth, if the religious hypothesis is true. For he represents the dispute between himself and Clifford as depending ultimately on a value-judgment - on whether it is "wiser and better" to yield to our fear of being in error than it is to yield to our hope that religion may be true. [18] If you believe, he says, you at least give yourself a chance of believing the truth.

Now the religious hypothesis as stated by James is framed very broadly in order to prescind from "the accidents" of particular religions. According to James, religion says two things

> First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word .... The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true. 19

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[16] Op.cit. P.25.

[17] Op.cit. P.26.

[18] Op.cit. P.27.

[19] Op.cit. pp.25-26.

As this is the content of the religious hypothesis, it would seem to be silly to believe it in order to give oneself the chance of believing truly. We would be simply adding to our beliefs a vague proposition with no useful connection with other beliefs. If we did believe truly, what difference would it make? There would be just as much point in choosing to believe that there was gold just below the surface of Neptune, in order to put ourselves in the way of believing that truth.

James puts forward something else in the light of which he says that it is illogical to put a veto on our active faith. But clearly this "something else" cannot be a mere addition - it must be something that makes the religious hypothesis worth believing. He says that "the more perfect and eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form", [20] and that "we feel ... as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way." [21] The feeling, in effect, is that after we have believed the "more eternal aspect of the universe" will offer evidence of himself. James says that this feeling "is part of the living essence of the religious hypothesis." [22] But it must be all of the living essence, since the mere chance of believing a true but isolated proposition scarcely goes towards making a hypothesis a live one.

James, then, is of the same mind as Clement of Alexandria's prophet who said "unless ye believe, neither shall ye understand." It is rather odd that James is satisfied with saying merely that an individual has a feeling that belief will be rewarded with knowledge. If James thought that, he might have cited the testimony of people who had had evidence offered them. And that is what he does in the many case studies in The Varieties of Religious Experience. Had James collected convincing

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[20] Op.cit. P.27.

[21] Op.cit. P.28

[22] ibid.

testimony he would have presented a fascinating study for the rationality of belief - that of a person who has evidence that after he believed a proposition he would acquire evidence for it. But it appears that in The Will to Believe James wishes to prescind from the question of evidence.

What now of James' argument against Clifford that he (Clifford) had decided not to risk error whereas James was prepared to run that risk in order to give himself the chance of believing the truth, and hence that the issue between them consists of one value judgment against the other? -

> It is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law. 23

James has not really given a complete enough account of why Clifford would reject the voluntary adoption of religious beliefs. Clifford maintains that such believings are the purely private activities of individuals which will cut them off from their fellows, and hence tend to fragment society. James might admit these consequences, yet maintain that "my own stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk." [24] This is to claim that the needs of individuals are ethically relevant. Clifford denies this since he believes that morality is essentially other-regarding. So the dispute between Clifford and James is ultimately ethical.

James mentions, as something of an ameliorating circumstance of the decision to believe, that if it were the case that we can know that we know, if there were some criterion by which we may be sure that the truth is in our grasp, then we "might feel disloyal to such a perfect organ of knowledge", [25] in believing before we were in possession

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[23] Op.cit. P.27.

[24] ibid.

[25] Op.cit. P.30.

of the criterion. But, he has argued, there is no such criterion. In the vast majority of cases in which we believe we do not know whether what we believe is true.

James, then, takes an extreme voluntarist line on belief, although he does not think that we are at complete liberty to believe. But even given his restrictions, it is clear that he thinks of belief as an act. Indeed, he says so, in italics:

> Indeed, we <u>may</u> wait (for evidence) if we will, - I hope you do not think that I am denying that, - but if we do so, we do so at our peril as much as if we believed. In either case we <u>act</u>, taking our life in our hands. 26

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26 ibid.

# CHAPTER 6. THE FREEDOM TO BELIEVE

## 1. Conclusions and Refutations

I shall list the freedoms that have been identified and then comment on them. It was found that:

1) We can always stop an enquiry and thus avoid believing a proposition which we suspect may be supported by the evidence that the enquiry may turn up.

It was found that Locke identified some reasons in the light of which we might refuse to admit a body of evidence as decisive. And in our discussion of Newman we found that sometimes we are free to 'detach' a proposition and claim it as true or probable tout court. In deciding to 'detach' P we decide to take it that the evidence in hand is decisive. So we can say:

2) Sometimes we are free to admit or not to admit a body of evidence.

It was found also:

3) That sometimes the evidence does not determine a specific probability, and that in such cases we have to decide how probable the conclusion is.

4) That in some cases we can reject a belief we already have, or we can continue in it.

5) That where a person has no interest in evidence or truth he might choose directly to believe P.

(See Chapter 1, Section 4 for 4) and 5))

6) That we can choose whether or not to overcome acceptance and rejection reactions i.e. in the first case, choose not to believe P rather than to believe P, and, in the second, choose not to believe not-P rather than to believe not-P.

7) That we can choose whether or not to withhold 'professions'. (Roughly, professions are proferrings of unconsidered opinion.)

(See Chapter 2, Section 7 for 6) and 7))

8) If we accept Hume's sceptical arguments, we can choose whether or not to believe that we perceive material objects and that inexperienced conjunctions are similar to experienced ones.

9) That we can affirm P if we don't know that P is false and P is a live hypothesis.

First of all, not all of these is a freedom to believe. The first is the freedom to pursue or abandon an enquiry. And the second does not involve a choice or decision to believe, although it involves doing something, viz. admitting a body of evidence, which will determine our belief. We might wonder whether 6) involves a choice to believe. It might be said that the choice here is to check or restrain an impulse, and that this is not a choice to believe. But what we do in these cases is choose to withhold or permit acceptances or rejections of a proposition, and if we choose to permit an act of acceptance we choose to believe, and if we permit a rejection we choose to disbelieve.

It might be asked whether professions are really beliefs. Let us consider an example. Suppose a person, who is a layman with respect to painting, says in a sudden burst of enthusiasm at a social gathering "Yes, all the greatest painters are Dutch". Then and there, he may well believe what he says. When the enthusiasm has passed and he reflects on his assertion, he may withhold assent, realizing that he doesn't know enough about painting to be in a position to judge. And surely it is true of many professions that they are reflected on in embarrassment. But when we make them we do believe them, although often such beliefs are short-lived. Many members of this class of beliefs illustrate the effect, momentary though it may be, of the "belief-factors" mentioned by James.

If we are rational, the freedom listed under 5) will not be open to us, since this freedom is the result of a lack of interest in evidence. Proposition 4, was used to cover a) the case of a person whose power to continue to believe or reject a proposition depended on his lack of interest in evidence, and b), to cover the case of a person who found

that he had no evidence for a proposition which he already held, but who did not reject it because of the difficulty involved in making consequential re-adjustments. If we are rational, the freedom described in a) will not be open to us. But I do not wish to say that such responses as b) are always irrational. The reaction of a person who accepts Hume's skeptical arguments but who still continues to trust his senses, since the effort required to maintain skepticism does not seem to him worthwhile, is a case in point. We might take 4(b) as the generalisation of which 8) is an instance.

It can be seen that most of the freedoms found here fall outside the province of judgment. Once we undertake to judge, we put ourselves in a position where we are determined by the evidence. However, it is an oversimplification to say that beyond the sphere of judgment we are free to affirm P whenever we do not know that P is false and whenever P is a live hypothesis. For our study of Locke showed that if we think it probable that P is false then we have some belief in the falsity of P, or we are sure that P is to such and such degree unlikely. And we cannot, when we are conscious that we have some degree of belief in the falsity of P, at the same time affirm P. If we believe that the enquiry is truly complete, and that some evidence stands clearly against P, we cannot but have some belief in the falsity of P, and hence we cannot choose to affirm P, and this is so even if we do not know that P is false. It must be emphasized that if this restriction is to apply to a person he must recognize some firm evidence against P. It is not enough that he acknowledge merely that P is improbable in the light of some propositions, for he may then assume that additional evidence may over-ride the contrary-seeming evidence. There must be no room for such assumptions if the evidence is to force assent. So we must modify 9) above to "We are free to affirm P as long as P is a live hypothesis and we do not acknowledge any firm evidence against P." This may be re-phrased in James' colourful language: we are free to believe any proposition live enough to tempt our will as long as there is no clear evidence against it.

Yet some philosophers have argued that we cannot choose to believe anything. Bernard Williams, for example, has maintained that not merely can a person not bring it about, just like that, that he believes something, but that it is not a contingent fact that this cannot be done. Before examining Williams' arguments there are some simple observations which prima facie make his conclusions doubtful. Most of us lack evidence for the proposition "inexperienced conjunctions between events are/will be similar to experienced conjunctions'. Of course, the vast majority of people simply presuppose this proposition without ever having thought of it. But a great number of academic philosophers will have considered this proposition or near formulations of it, and many of them will have come to believe that they have no (non-circular) justification for it. Yet they still continue to believe it. How does this come about? Maybe these philosophers realise that there is no point in withholding assent from this proposition, since they know that they will constantly have to act as though it were true. This is a real possibility, and must make us doubt the cogency of Williams' argument. Reflections closely similar to those about induction, can be made about memory judgments, since it is widely held by philosophers that there is no non-circular justification of memory-judgments.

Williams states his case for the impossibility of deciding directly to believe:

> One reason is connected with the characteristic of beliefs that they aim at truth. If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. 1

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1 B.A.O. Williams. 'Deciding to Believe' in Language, Belief and Metaphysics ed. Howard E. Keifer and Milton K. Munitz. State University Press of New York. Albany. 1970. pp 107-8.

Put simply, Williams' argument seems to be this: Beliefs aim at truth. If I were conscious of not knowing anything about the truth or falsity of P, I couldn't choose to believe it, because I would know that I do not have any idea of how P stands with respect to the truth. I now proceed to argue against Williams. If a man affirms P he claims that P is true, and thus makes P a reality for himself. In claiming P as true, he does of course, aim at the truth. And he may do this conscious of not having any indications that P is true. If he is conscious of that, he will realize that his aim may miss the mark - that what he claims as true may be false. But such may be his love of his picture of the real as it includes P, that he may be prepared to risk being in error, and he may proceed to affirm P in order to let this picture have its full effect on him. What this man aims at ultimately is to let a picture of what there is take possession of him. In order to do this he claims P as true - aims at the truth - and is willing to run the risk that his aim misses the mark.

But Williams returns to the argument. After the event, he says:

> I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i.e. something I take to be true, and also know that I had acquired it at will.

This seems to be the same point as before: How could I take P to be true, and at the same time realise that I did not know anything about the truth of P. Well, if I realised that, I would know that if I affirmed P, I would do so at the risk of being in error. But, as James points out, I may think the risk worth taking in view of what I gain in the case that the affirmation is true.

Williams has yet another (unfortunately rather obscure) argument which stems from considerations about perceptual belief. He says that our concept of empirical belief requires that there be regular connections between the environment, our perception, and the beliefs that result. Undoubtedly that is the case for the concept of empirical belief. However he continues:

> But a state that could be produced at will would not satisfy these demands because there would be no regular connection between the environment, the perceptions and what the man came out with, which is a necessary condition of a belief ... 2

Williams seems to be suggesting here that there must be regular connections between the environment, perceptions and any belief that we hold. But are there any regular connections between the environment, perceptions and e.g. beliefs that we form as a result of what we read, or as a result of what we hear said, since it is the case that we do not believe all that we read or all that we hear asserted?

Perhaps Williams has something else in mind. He may be arguing that we have a concept of empirical belief which rests on a lot of presuppositions about perception and the environment, and that this concept could not survive if we were able to believe at will, because, for example, as I look around this room, I could come to believe whatever I like about its contents. Hence there would cease to be any sort of regular relationship between what I believe about my environment and my perceptions of it. Now against this, someone who thinks that we can sometimes choose to believe need not hold that we can choose to believe whatever we like. He may recognize that we cannot choose to believe what we realise is inconsistent with what we already know. More pertinently, he can recognise that perception is causally linked to beliefs, so that we cannot help coming to believe as a result of what we perceive. Hence, the anti-Williams theorist may hold, we cannot choose to believe anything that we know is inconsistent with these beliefs. That position offers no threat to the concept of empirical belief.

Roy Edgley, in the same vein as Williams, asserts:

> The meaning of the word 'believe' is such that this word cannot meaningfully fill the gap in

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2 Op.cit. P.108.

> 'I made myself X by an effort of will'. There is no will to belief in this sense. 3

Whatever meaning Edgley attaches to 'believe', the sense relevant here is 'claim as true' or 'affirm'. We have argued that a man can choose to believe in this sense. But it is odd to speak of such a choice as requiring an effort of will. If a man does choose to believe something, he does so presumably because it is to his advantage, hence it is unlikely that overcoming contrary desires be required for the affirmation. In certain circumstances, however, this may be the situation. A person may choose to believe P in order to make himself acceptable to an elite group, and he may despise himself for this, so that an effort is required to make himself believe. The nature of the group may be such that it is not enough that the man say that he believes P and acts in accordance with P. That may be a dangerous procedure. He may really have to assume that P is the case - to connect P firmly to what he thinks there is, so that P participates in the connections that (so he takes it) obtain among real objects. He may have to do that in order to come, naturally, to have expectations about P. In our society, and especially in the academic parts of it, we are able to believe as the arguments take us, and pressures to conform do not extend to beliefs. However, they might in other societies. And Edgley himself sketches a case in which choice may be involved in belief: 'thinking may be wishful and ... one may be tempted to jump to a conclusion that one finds flattering or otherwise agreeable'. [4] Since there is a temptation, an effort of will may be required not to jump to a conclusion, or in other words, not to arrive at a belief.

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[3] R. Edgley. Reason in Theory and Practice. Hutchinson University Library, London, 1969. P.64.

[4] Edgley, op.cit. P.96.

## 2. Findlay's Objection

A point more fundamental than Edgley's and Williams' is made by J.N. Findlay in Values and Intentions. He makes a challenging comment about the kind of concept of assent that we have worked with. He writes:

> (We cannot) accept an analysis (of belief) purely in terms of personal feeling or peculiar mental modulations, e.g. assent, seriousness, conviction etc. whose character is complete in the instant of its occurrence, and which has no essential reference to other completing experiences or readiness for experience .... The notion of belief as a self-contained personal feeling further encounters the same sort of objection as a parallel theory of ethical approval: that it renders mysterious why it should be wrong or bad to believe the false, and right or good to believe the true... 5

What Findlay has to say about belief in Values and Intentions is, unfortunately, often rather obscure (the above passage is clearer than many) but it is difficult to avoid feeling that he is making important points. Perhaps we can sum up the position in the quotation as follows:

1) Any account of belief cannot be in terms of an event or state alone, but must refer to other experiences or readiness for experience.

2) Unless a theory about the nature of belief includes a reference to some other experience or readiness for experience, it cannot explain why it is disadvantageous to the believer to believe what is false.

I have substituted 'disadvantagageous' for 'bad' in this context. Findlay would doubtless disapprove, but the use of 'bad' involves a point of view irrelevant for our purposes.

I will attempt to meet the points Findlay makes by expressing his views in my own way. First of all, we have not been trying to give an analysis of belief per se, but we have been discussing the implications of ways of coming to believe e.g. assent and judgment. To assent is to come to believe something. But when a man comes to believe P

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5 J.N. Findlay. Values and Intentions. Allen & Unwin, 1961. P.96.

by assenting to P, surely he does more than merely affirm P. What more he does can, partly anyway, be brought to light by the concept of taking for granted. Let us consider what we do when we entertain P, and then assent to P. I may be sitting in my room entertaining the proposition "There is a wombat in front of the Coombs Building". Now suppose that someone whose room faces the front of the Coombs Building and who knows of my interest in native fauna, comes into my room, and in tones that are unmistakeably definite and sincere informs me that he has seen a wombat in front of the Coombs Building. Not only do I continue to entertain that proposition, I assent to it as well. But when I merely entertained the proposition, all that I was doing was thinking of an object rather like a medium-sized pig as being in a certain location. But now that I have assented to the proposition I take many other propositions that relate to it for granted as well, e.g. that there is solid earth beneath the animal, that there is air surrounding it, that the beast has a history stretching back some weeks, that it has had something to eat at some time over the past week, that it will be resistant to the push of my hand, and so on indefinitely. Further, I take for granted that if I went to the front of the Coombs Building I would see the wombat. Of course, I should be surprised if some of these propositions did not hold, and thunderstruck if others (viz. those relating to materiality) did not hold.

In acknowledging the truth of the proposition about the wombat, I included it in my picture of what there is. In particular, I included it in my picture of what physical nature is and what animality is. Everything that goes into those pictures goes into my belief that the wombat is in front of the Coombs Building. Consequently, I take for granted many propositions pertinent to the facts about wombats, and it is these takings for granted that bring me beyond the mere act of acknowledgment of truth and cause me to have expectations - some of which relate to possible future experiences. It is because of these expectations that it is to my advantage to believe what is true, because if I believe what is false, I will anticipate what is not there, and my actions will not have their intended results.

How I come to have my picture of the real is obviously an enormous subject, and I do not have to enter into it, but I note what is obvious, that sense experience plays the major part in it. And unfortunately, I can do little more than make some remarks about how taking for granted enters into consciousness. [6] Evidently, these states are buried fairly deep in that they do not enter much into consciousness. But Findlay thinks that some takings for granted that cluster around an assent, do manifest themselves to the believer. The way in which this happens may be clarified by starting with Price's views about entertaining propositions.

Price believes that what we do when we entertain a proposition cannot be fully explained or analyzed, but he believes that some aspects of this activity can be described. Price says that when we hear or read something and know what is asserted, we are then ready to consider in various ways what is asserted, we are then ready to recognize what is asserted. Now we have capacities both to consider and recognize even when they are not being exercized. For example, in a dreamless sleep I have a capacity to recognize a cat about as large as a pig who walks on his hind legs, who can talk, and who is a crack shot with a Browning automatic. I also have a capacity to consider these things. In a dreamless sleep these capacities are not at all actualized. More particularly, I am not ready to actualize them. But when I read about this fantastic cat in Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita I am ready both to recognize and consider it, even though I am not actually recognizing or considering it. In a similar way, I am able to run, but this capacity is not at all actualized as I sit at my desk writing. The capacity comes much closer to actualization when I am poised ready to run, even though I am not then running. The readiness to recognize and consider that Price sees as part of entertaining, is, he says, "actually felt or experienced." [7]

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[6] In the next section I shall comment on the relation between takings for granted and confidence.

[7] H H. Price, Belief, P.201.

On such occasions, we might say, with Price, that the disposition is sub-activated.

It is noteworthy that when I entertain P these readinesses relate directly to P itself. But when I assent to P, as well as the capacities that are sub-activated by the entertainment of P, other similar capacities that extend beyond P may be sub-activated as well. For example, on hearing that there is a wombat in front of the Coombs Building I may be ready to discover that there are one or two happy looking people standing near-by discussing it, and/or I may expect to see that the animal is taking evasive action. The object of this last expectation need not be consciously apprehended but I may be "ready" or "set" or "poised" to see just that, and this readiness may be experienced. Thus when I assent to P, some capacities may be sub-activated that are related to the slice of reality in which, I take it, P is set.

When a man assents to P, or affirms the truth of P, he claims that P is part of the real, or, more properly, makes P part of his picture of the real. But once P becomes part of his picture of the real, it participates in all the connexions that he takes to obtain among real objects. Hence he comes to take many things for granted about P.

The ideas here expressed are derived from Findlay. Perhaps I should conclude by letting him state his own case:

> ... to take something to be real or true, in contexts where these words express unqualified belief, does involve precisely such a readiness to go beyond the narrow bounds of content or meaning. It does mean being ready to consider what is asserted in the light of countless possible circumstances, however alien, that could possibly bear upon it, it does in short mean being ready to fit it into a context capable of indefinite expansion and in every possible direction... 8

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8 Findlay. Op.cit. P.98.

### 3. Confidence and Choosing to Believe

Although I have argued that we can choose, here and now, to affirm P as long as we do not have firm evidence against P and P is live enough to tempt our will, we cannot choose here and now to be certain or confident that P. The question arises as to the nature of the relation between confidence and assent. Confidence is naturally a property of those assents we make as a result of the perception of evidence, whether that is deductively or non-deductively tied to the proposition assented to, or in the case that the proposition assented to is a self-evident proposition. Of course, sometimes we are confident or certain of P because of conditions other than the perception of evidence, but I suggest that this latter condition is the only one under which we may be rationally fully assured or confident. Newman gives an excellent description of the feeling we have when we know that the evidence is decisive:

> It is a feeling of satisfaction and self gratulation, of intellectual security, arising out of a sense of success, attainment, possession, finality, as regards the matter which has been in question. As a conscientious deed is attended by a self-approval which nothing but itself can create, so certitude is united to a sentiment sui generis in which it lives and is manifested. [9]

Newman thinks that this feeling attaches only to those assents which follow 'examination and proof'.[10] Evidently, he is thinking of perceived strength of evidence, but he has forgotten self-evident propositions, of which we are likewise certain, but which do not require examination and proof. Newman has also forgotten about certainties which may have been irrationally acquired.

When we perceive the evidence to be inconclusive we are uneasy about the truth of P, or we have some doubt about P. And it is perceived weakness of evidence, I

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[9] Newman, Grammar. P.168.

[10] Newman, op.cit. P.191.

suggest, that justifies rational doubt. The point about rationality is important. It is not the case that we are only doubtful when we perceive that the evidence is weak. There are plenty of cases of neurotic doubt, of people worrying about whether P is the case when they have ample evidence that it is. But when a man has sufficient evidence for P, doubt about P is irrational. Similarly, people's confidence may be inflated out of all proportion to the evidence by fantasies of what they would like to be true. Such confidence would be irrational. This thesis about the rationality of feelings of doubt and confidence needs to be qualified in some such way as 'confidence is prima facie rational only under our specified conditions', since, for example, the prima facie irrationality of inflating feelings of confidence by expedients such as the repetition of a proposition may be overriden by other considerations. To illustrate, a soldier going into battle may, in order to maintain his self-control, find it necessary to reinforce his confidence in this way, and if he did, there would be nothing irrational about it. Still, the prima facie irrationality of such a procedure stands.

If it is irrational to be confident about P on an occasion, it follows that we ought not to be confident on that occasion. In the chapter on Clifford I said that when we attend to the evidence we cannot help but be confident to the extent that the evidence determines us, but that afterwards, when we are occupied elsewhere, confidence is subject to other pressures from without and within. On such occasions as these it is possible to control the confidence we feel by directing our attention - by withholding it from whatever it is that is affecting our confidence or doubt. But though such states are thus indirectly subject to self-control we cannot produce them at will.

Just as feelings of certainty and confidence are naturally linked to assents made when the strength of the evidence has been perceived, so do feelings of doubt naturally attach to the perceived weakness of evidence. Such feelings do not characterise takings for granted, and they are not normally attached to spontaneous acceptances,

or decisions to affirm P when we have no evidence, as long, that is, as we do not advert to the question of evidence. There is no feeling of 'security and repose' associated with my taking for granted that this building will remain firm, although once I think of that proposition I become certain of it, because I recognize that there is strong evidence for it. And when I decide to claim P as true when I know that I have no evidence for P, the only feelings I am likely to have which are especially relevant to my acceptance of P are feelings of doubt, or feelings of uneasiness about the truth of P. Of course I can, in these circumstances commit myself to P - resolve to ignore all doubts about P and determine to live according to P. Commitment, with its implication of resoluteness, is apposite in this context.

In some ways, the state that we described as taking for granted is similar to the state of certainty. We act on what we take for granted with total reliance. For example, I take for granted that the pen with which I now write will not go through the paper, and I act in complete accordance with this belief. And the surprise we have when we find that these propositions are false is as great as our surprise would be on discovering that something we had held to be certain is false. Should I now find that the air I am breathing is poisonous I should be as surprised as I would be if I were to find that Mr Nixon has not and never had any intention of visiting China. In contrast, anyone who decided to affirm P and act as though P were true, could not be <u>that</u> surprised if he found out that P were false.

Unconscious assents, once given, often bear a similar relation to certainty as do takings for granted. A person who has been won over by an orator, or assented, without his noticing it, to a news bulletin, may act on what he has heard without even suspecting that he may be on insecure ground. Of course, that need not happen. What he had unconsciously accepted he may later reject, or it may fade from his memory. But when such propositions are not subject to later reflection, and when they are not forgotten, they

may be acted upon with the same kind of complete trust as those propositions that we are convinced of.

Although I have worked extensively with the concept of judgment I have not stated explicitly what that is. We can say that judgments are simply assents with a certain kind of antecedent, which might consist in the accumulation, comparison and final assessment of evidence, or in a simple grasp of the evidence. What is essential to judgment is that there be a gauging of the support of the proposition assented to. Feelings of confidence, certainty and doubt attach to assents which have been made subsequent to the perceived strength of evidence - and it has been suggested that feelings of doubt and certainty are only rational when they arise under these conditions.

Given these positions, it follows that we cannot choose directly to be certain or confident that P; for we cannot just choose to have these feelings. Nor can we choose to judge that P (for judging requires evidence and we cannot just choose to have evidence) but we can, it has been argued, choose to affirm P.

# APPENDIX

## Discussion of Price on Assent

The views that have been set out in this thesis will become clearer when they are contrasted with others. Accordingly, I will discuss the doctrine of assent that Price expounds in his book Belief. [1]

Price's conception of assent is much narrower than the one that we have used. He holds that a person assents to a proposition when the following conditions are satisfied: when the person has been in doubt about which of several propositions is true, when he considers the evidence for them, and when he "prefers" or "plumps" for one rather than another. [2] This last act is what Price calls assent. We need a name for it, he says. We cannot just call it coming to believe, he argues, [3] for we often come to believe in an unreasonable way - our beliefs often come about in a "behind the scenes" or unconscious manner, without our noticing what is happening to us. But in the kind of case that Price draws our attention to, "the multiform disposition we call 'believing'" is initiated by a conscious mental act. A word is needed to distinguish it, and Price uses "assent" for the purpose.

According to Price, after we have assessed the evidence for the alternative propositions we had been wondering about, we "prefer" or "plump" for one of them. Price summarizes his view of assent by saying that it is the taking up of an attitude to an entertained proposition, and that the attitude has two features or components (a) Preference, (b) Confidence. He offers the following amplification:

> It is important to notice the preferential character of assent. (In assenting to P we dissent from Q and R.) This is why we find it

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[1] H.H Price, Belief, Allen & Unwin, 1969.

[2] Price, op.cit. P.206.

[3] Price, op.cit. P.298.

> natural to describe assent in the language of choice. We speak not only of deciding to (i.e. deciding to do something) but also of deciding that. After waiting for 1½ hours, I decided that John had missed the train. We also speak of "making up our mind that ..." as well as making up our mind to do something. After some doubt, I made up my mind that the bird was a lesser spotted woodpecker. 4

One must allow Price his examples. There are cases where the evidence is weak, as it seems to be in these instances, where we make up our mind that something is the case, or, to refer to a different aspect of the situation, there are cases in which we decide to trust the evidence we have, however slight it may be. In cases of this sort there may well be an element of preference in the assent. But there need not be, even when the evidence is slight. For we may be entertaining a proposition for which we have only weak evidence, and we may be in doubt whether to trust it or not. In the end we may prefer to trust the evidence, or, as Price says, we may make up our minds that P. But there need not have been a preference between propositions here, for it may be that no other propositions were thought of. The preference may simply have been to trust the evidence for P rather than not to trust it.

Similarly, a person may encounter a substantial body of evidence for P, and in virtue of the evidence judge that probably P. Surely, here he also assents to P, even though he has not considered that something else may be true. In this case, there is no element of preference in the assent. The man simply notices that the evidence confers some probability on P, and acknowledges that.

Evidently, when Price is theorizing about the nature of assent, he is taking as a model what we have called judgment, and he is taking a rather special sort of judgment as his model viz., one in which the evidence is not decisive. But although he uses that model in order to elucidate the nature of assent, he sometimes uses the word 'assent' in a wider sense. For example, he says that it is

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4 Op.cit. P.206.

clear that we cannot assent to any proposition we please,[5] and he says that if an inference (of the form Because of P, therefore Q) is to be conscious and explicit, then we must assent to the premiss and the conclusion. In respect of the premiss in this instance, assent need involve neither judgment nor preference.

Since Price has selected a restricted model of judgment as his model of assent, he has very little to say about spontaneous acceptances or rejections of propositions, or considered assents outside of the context of judgment. And given the perspective in which he views assent he is forced to consider the question of what freedom we have to assent in the form of the question "what sorts of freedoms do we have when we make judgments?" In fact he has an excellent discussion of that question (in the Chapter on Inference and Assent), and I have only minor quarrels with it. He writes:

> It is an important fact about the autonomous character of rational beings that we can, if we wish, inhibit or suspend this extension of belief from one proposition to another, until we are satisfied that Q is indeed a consequence of P, and satisfied also about the strength of the logical connection between them. 6

It is stated here that we suspend belief <u>until</u> we perceive that P is indeed a consequence of Q. There is a suggestion that when we see that we then give our assent to P. But once we have noticed that P is the consequence of Q we have already assented to P, that is, if we already assent to Q. Price also says:

> Our freedom is exercized again in our willingness to be guided by the strength, be it great or little, of the logical connection between the two propositions, and to conclude accordingly. For instance, we notice that P makes Q very likely, but does not make it certain. Then, though we feel absolutely sure that P, we shall not allow ourselves to feel absolutely sure that Q, but, only have a pretty confident opinion that Q. 7

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[5] Op.cit. P.222.

[6] Op.cit. P.293.

[7] Op.cit. P.206-7.

But surely if we noticed that P does not make Q certain, we could not, then and there, feel sure of Q, hence there is no point in recomending restraining our feelings with respect to Q.

It is noteworthy that Price's account of assent and his analysis of the freedom we have in judgment are put forward in two separated sections - the first in the exposition of "the traditional occurrence analysis",[8] and the second in a discussion of inference and assent. Had Price considered his account of assent in the light of what he says about inference and assent, he might have revised what he has to say about the preferential component in assent.

There are a couple more points to be made about Price's account of belief. He seems to think that the Locke-Newman account of assent and the Hume account of belief are simply two different versions of the "occurrence-analysis" of belief.[9] He does not consider whether each account might be true of different phenomena. This lack of discrimination produces some odd statements. For example, he writes:

> If someone asks me (or I ask myself) whether I do believe the proposition P or whether I really believe it, I may consciously and attentively entertain the proposition P; and then I may find myself assenting to it. 10

Surely, if one wished to perform this experiment, one would think of the proposition in order to see whether it had the characteristic "feel" of believed propositions. One wouldn't wait to see whether one was going to assent to it. It is surprising that Price misses this point, since he offers an extremely illuminating account of how belief dispositions manifest themselves in a person's conscious mental activities.

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8 See op.cit. P.206-7.

9 See op.cit. P.245.

10 Op.cit. P.298.

Finally, Price holds, as we do, that confidence is naturally a feature of judgment. His sense of confidence is much the same as ours, but he has a tendency to confuse confidence with its consequences, He says:

> We may rely on P whole-heartedly, with no mental reservations at all. Then we have assented with complete conviction.

But surely we would rely on P whole-heartedly after we have assented to P with complete conviction.

# CHAPTER 7. TESTIMONY

## 1. The Diversity of Justification

The following statement of Hume's about why we believe witnesses is disarmingly categorical:

> The reason why we place any credit in witnesses and historians is not derived from any connection which we perceive a priori between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them. 1

But surely our grounds for believing a particular witness do not always lie in our having noticed in the past such a large-scale correlation as testimonies corresponding with facts. This does not take into account that our assessment of the nature of the individual witness is often important for our confidence in his reliability. I believe what the vice-chancellor tells me that he has witnessed because I know that he is a careful, sober man, and I disregard what a small child tells me because I have reason to believe that he is not able to restrict himself to describing adequately only what he has observed. And we find that Hume does say that character is relevant in the evaluation of witnesses:

> We entertain a suspicion concerning any matter of fact when the witnesses ... are but few or of doubtful character, when they have any interest in what they affirm, when they deliver their testimony with hesitation, or on the contrary, with too violent assertions. 2

As a statement about why we reject witnesses, this is open to different interpretations. But we might infer from it that Hume would hold that we do, and should, base our confidence in witnesses on the uniformity that we have observed between witnesses of a certain character and true testimonies.

Hume mentions another correlation that is germane to the assessment of testimony: that between certain kinds of reports and the facts. He writes

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1 An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding. David Hume. The Liberal Arts Press, New York, 1955. Ed. C.W. Hendell. pp 120-121.

2 Op.cit. P.120.

> And as the evidence derived from witnesses and human testimony is founded on past experience, so it varies with the experience and is regarded either as a proof, or a probability, according as the conjunction between any particular kind of report and any kind of object has been found to be constant or variable. 3

Now this point suffers because very often there may be no obvious way of classifying a report. To borrow an example from Mr C.A.J. Coady, suppose someone who has just been there tells me that there is a sick lion at Taronga Park Zoo. What kind of report is that? A medical report, an animal report, a lion report, a zoo report or an existence report? But given that there may be difficulties of this nature, we may still learn that reports about some kinds of subject-matter are especially suspect. For example, the spectacle of vast horror, as in concentration camps, may activate mechanisms in people such that they find it difficult to report accurately what they saw, and we may come to learn this. We may find, from personal experience, that political events like strikes and demonstrations are subject to biased reporting in some newspapers, and that, for example, holiday resorts are unreliably described in certain sorts of magazines. So from our own experience we may discover that some kinds of subject matter are liable to characteristic distortion in certain sorts of media.

We are able to find in Hume, then, three sorts of uniformity on which we might base our trust in a witness. Hume need not select one of these as the legitimate reason for belief in witnesses. As long as we base our expectation of future events on correlations observed in the past we are acting rationally, according to Hume, so any of the correlations he mentions might serve as a basis for trust in a witness.

Our discussion of authority prepared us for the view that the grounds for accepting testimony may legitimately be diverse. This leads us to suspect that it may be the case that on some occasions the grounds Hume mentions are behind our acceptance of testimony, but on other occasions

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3 ibid.

the grounds lie elsewhere. And it is not hard to think of situations in which the three sorts of ground Hume mentions obtain. For example, the large correlation between any testimony and the facts may be what justifies a person of limited experience, a young child, for example, in believing a witness. It may be that for a given five year old child, the sort of testimony he has been given relates largely to his own environment, so he may have had ample opportunity to verify the testimonies himself. Consequently, he may have good inductive evidence for the proposition "Testimonies made to me are usually correct."

A building supervisor, used to a high turn-over of unskilled builders' labourers, would have to check the reports they gave about e.g., the straightness of lines. As a result of his checking he may come to learn that certain sorts of persons are reliable, and he may identify them in advance, and he may trust their reports without checking. We may illustrate how experience of the conformity between certain kinds of reports and the facts may serve as a foundation for belief in witnesses by taking for an example an insurance company's assessor whose job it is to check claims of storm damage. As a result of long experience of checking he may come to suspect reports that he has not yet verified.

So there are cases where a belief in witnesses is based on the sorts of correlations Hume mentions. But we might wonder whether belief in testimony <u>always</u> has these foundations. For it is implausible to maintain that we have "found the conformity" at all for many types of case, and if we have, it is even more doubtful that we have found it in a sufficient number of cases to justify the credence we give to witnesses. The list of character types and kinds of reports that we would have to have correlated with the facts, could be expanded indefinitely. And besides the testimony of people we meet, we read books and magazines containing reports of peoples and places, in distant locations and in times past, and we read, and believe, accounts of scientific observations. The daily press, radio and television are full of eyewitnesses accounts which we very frequently believe. Price points out that sign posts

and maps and the gradations on rulers are a form of testimony, and that we rely on testimony for the date of our birth, and, indeed, for the day's date. [4] To this list we might add cookery books which provide ways of preparing what they affirm are fair-tasting dishes. Evidently, testimony claims our belief in innumerable ways. It seems implausible to assert that we accept testimonies because we have observed either that sources of these kinds usually give true reports, or that reports of these sorts are usually correct. It is just doubtful whether we have made these observations.

Price is impressed by this kind of point, [5] so he says that instead of basing our acceptance of testimonies on statements about correlations which require evidence which we don't have, we ought to formulate a policy about the circumstances under which it is reasonable to accept a testimony. The policy he recommends is this: 'Believe what you are told by others unless or until you have reasons for doubting it.' [6] Price says, in support of this policy, that our own observations are circumscribed in space and time. We need information about what happened in places and times in which we were not present. We can get this information by listening to what people who were there have to say about what they observed. Price calls this an "economic" justification for relying on testimony, since it employs a strategy an individual may use to augment his own resources for acquiring information.

But then, how does he know that he <u>is</u> getting information from the 'observers'? Earlier in the chapter on testimony, Price said that in accepting testimonies we seem to be adhering to the principle 'what there is said to be (or to have been) there is (or was) more often than not.' [7] He said that we do not have enough evidence to

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[4] H.H. Price, <u>Belief</u>, Allen & Unwin, 1969, pp. 112-113.

[5] Op.cit. P.114.

[6] Op.cit. P.124.

[7] Op.cit. P.114.

justify belief in that principle, so he turns from belief in generalizations to consider a policy about what we ought to do when confronted with a testimony. But in order to justify adoption of the policy, Price presupposes that witnesses generally tell the truth. His own problem about the evidence for that generalization then returns.

Evidently, Price is thinking about testimony per se, and asking what our grounds are for believing any testimony whatsoever. Now it may be that owing to the sorts of way in which testimonies themselves differ and owing to the different sorts of situations we find ourselves in, as recipients of testimony, that there is no single generalization that describes an adequate basis for relying on witnesses. We have found that on some occasions Hume's correlations support our belief. Let us now consider the case of an undergraduate reading, and believing, e.g. what De Broglie has to say about the micro-constituents of bodies. Not everything De Broglie says will be the report of an observation. There will be a fair amount of theorizing. But there may be observation statements - about what has been observed through electron microscopes and in cloud chambers and so on. It may be that the student believes these statements because he has read that De Broglie has a Nobel prize and because De Broglie is writing about his field of expertise. Is the student justified in believing that a Nobel Prize Winner is a reliable witness about what can be seen through the instruments that he is used to dealing with? Presumably, but just what the student's justification is for his beliefs about the competency of Nobel Prize Winners is a very complex and indirect business. He believes that there are competent judges of Nobel Prizes. Why does he believe that? Because he trusts the scientific system that selects the judges? Why does he do that? If we pursue these questions we may in the end discover some personal experiences (as Hume would like us to do) in which trust in the system is founded. But the foundation may be extremely indirect, in part relating to the student's knowledge of the success of science, the competence and precision that seem to him to characterize many scientific writings, and so on.

Let us take what is perhaps the most common case of testimony viz. that of an acquaintance telling us of something he has observed. What is our justification for believing him? If we do believe him, it will be because we are satisfied about his general competence and honesty. And what is the justification for our confidence in those? The answer to this question varies according to our relationship with the person. If he is a colleague, we will have heard him express views about subjects in common fields of expertise. From what we know of these fields we can form a judgment about his competence. We may be satisfied about his honesty simply because there has never been any reason to suspect it.

However this point about honesty raises a problem for non-Humean types of justification. In the case above, we have no reason to suspect the intentions of the witness. The same is true for the undergraduate reading De Broglie. And in innumerable cases in which we trust witnesses, as when we believe travellers' books, news bulletins, sign-posts and cookery books, we rely on the good intentions of the testifier. Now it may be that this background set of beliefs about intentions itself rests on testimony viz. on what people declare their intentions to be. I shall take this point up in the next section of this paper.

Let us now turn to situations in which we distrust witnesses. A student of Hume might think that we ought to distrust witnesses whenever we have not made the sorts of observation Hume cites. But this is not an adequate statement of the variety of reasons for which we withhold belief from testimonies. I am inclined to disbelieve what drunken, agitated people tell me that they have observed. I suspect, similarly, the testimonies of incorrigible romancers, and known pessimists describing ironies or disasters to which they were witness, and hard-headed empiricists, for I have the prejudice that they are coldly selfish types who do not really care if you find out what happened or not. In a similar fashion I distrust the sensationalist press.

I do not trust agitated drunks, because I observe that they have difficulty in achieving coherence, hence I infer that they are unlikely to put together properly what they are reporting. Incorrigible romancers, I know from past experience, love a rich tale, hence, I infer, they are likely to enrich any report, even an eye-witness report. Similarly, with appropriate alterations, for known pessimists. My experience of coldly selfish people tells me that the interests of third-parties are of no interest to them, hence, I infer, that when they are reporting what they have observed, they are likely to give an abbreviated version in order that they may more quickly go about their own business. It is apparent from the productions of the sensationalist press that it concentrates on massive stimulation of nerve-centres, so I infer that there is a likelihood that it gives slanted reports.

It is noteworthy that in these cases my ground for suspecting the witnesses does not rest on past observations of performances of witnesses of similar character, but simply on what I know of these character types. From that I infer to their probable performance as witness.

Another reason that may lead me to withhold belief from a testimony is my perception that the witness is affected by some strong emotion like anger or hatred, or that he is temporarily suffering from extreme fatigue. I know from my own case that when in the grip of a strong emotion I tend to colour the facts, and I know from my own experience that when I am very tired I find it difficult to recall in detail what I observed, and that even when I can do that, under these conditions, I often fail to adequately express what I remember. Consequently, when I see others similarly affected, I infer that their testimony may suffer.

I am not denying that on occasions our reasons for withholding belief from witnesses may rest on the fact that we have not noticed correlations of the Humean sort, for on some occasions that <u>may</u> lie behind our distrust. Our building supervisor may find that a new builder's labourer is a university graduate, and owing to lack of

familiarity with graduates, he may refuse to take on trust some of the man's reports about the job.

I conclude then that the Humean pattern of justification is not the only sort of justification there is in these matters and since there are other forms of justification, and since the Humean form requires that we do a vast amount of personal checking that we would not ordinarily consider worthwhile, I shall not consider the claim that we should make the Humean form our form of justification.

## 2. The Circularity Problem

We have noted that for a very wide range of testimonies (but not all) we rely on the good intentions of testifiers. We take it that they wish to testify correctly, and not, for some reason, to offer a misleading testimony. Does our knowledge of the intentions of others itself rest on testimony, or is there some non-circular way of justifying this knowledge? As a preliminary observation we may note that animals are able to discern desires in one another, and they do not rely on testimony for this. They can discern when others want the food that they are eating, and when others want to attack them or be friendly towards them.

We saw that in some cases our distrust of witnesses was based on their observable behaviour and sometimes on argument from analogy with our own case. Can we reasonably base our beliefs about the intentions of others on observation of them and on knowledge of our own case? We know what we ourselves want - for a variety of fundamental wants at least. We know that we want food and shelter, some sort of community with our fellows, and we know that we want information from others that we are unable to obtain ourselves. We certainly see other people acting as if they have these wants too. Putting what we know of ourselves and what we observe of others together, do we have enough evidence to justify us in saying that we know what certain of their fundamental wants are? In

particular, do we have enough evidence that others want information from us? If we do, we might infer that they would exercize some care in giving us the information we require of them.

It might be thought that the circularity problem goes a stage deeper, because, before we could know that "others" want to give us information, we would first have to know that they are people. Otherwise, it might be urged, for all we know, the "others" might be automata reacting in a way that merely resembles the presentation of signs. In order to know that we were confronted with people, it may be pressed, wouldn't we have to rely on testimony - on what they tell us they observe, remember and feel? But, against this, we may follow up the "information" these individuals give us, and discover that it is almost always correct. If we discovered that, we would have reason to think that they wanted to testify correctly. As such testimonies were confirmed, we would come to learn that the testifier observes and remembers just as we do. In other words, the evidence we have that they wish to testify correctly also goes to show that they are persons. So there is no cause to hold that we must establish that the testifiers are persons before accepting their testimony.

The circularity problem arises only for those cases in which we do not rely on experienced correlations, or checking, to provide us with inductive support that testimonies of a given sort are usually correct. Now these inductions provide us with evidence, not only that testimonies of a given sort usually are correct, but also with evidence that the testifiers in these cases wish to give true reports. And they provide us with, admittedly weaker, evidence that testifiers in general wish to testify correctly. Combining this evidence with what we observe of others and know from our own case about our wants and intentions, can we say that we have enough evidence to justify us in holding that others wish to give us information? Unfortunately, I know of no way in which this question can be answered.

Before examining the implications of an affirmative and negative reply to this question, it is worth pointing out that the circularity problem may arise with regard to other aspects of testimony. For, if testimonies are to be usually accurate, in addition to the testifiers wanting to testify accurately, the following conditions must be met:

1) People must generally observe correctly.
2) People must generally remember accurately what they have observed.
3) People must be capable of expressing adequately what they remember.

Do we have adequate evidence, apart from testimony, that these conditions hold?

We have plenty of observational evidence that the first condition holds. For example, we see that most people steer themselves successfully through their environment. We can see, too, that objects like buildings, bridges and aeroplanes, which require delicate observations in their construction, have a fair degree of durability, hence the observations made by the engineers must have been accurate. It may be that, in the end, some of our evidence for this type of case reduces to testimony, but that is not obvious and I assume that it is not so.

Our evidence that people in general remember correctly is not as clear cut. For it seems that the best evidence we have for what people remember is their statements on this subject viz. testimony. But maybe there is good indirect evidence. We know, in our own case, that we rely on memory continuously. When we return to our work after having left it for a time, we remember that the job we take up is the one we left, and we remember what is required for its successful pursuance. And unless we could remember certain fundamental things - what print means, for example, and what the function of writing instruments is, we could not continue our work. Other people, we assume, are in a similar position. And since they successfully cope with their work, we may infer that their memories are more reliable than not. This argument rests on what we know of our own memory and what we observe of the activities of

others. Doubtless, arguments of this sort can be expanded indefinitely, so I take it that we have good evidence that memory is, in general, reliable.

There seems to be no difficulty in showing that we have sound evidence for the third condition. As long as we know that people are able in general to express themselves competently we have reason to think that they can adequately express what they remember. We see that people, for the most part, have no difficulty in expressing what they observe (what they observe we can observe too) and since they can competently describe that, there is no reason to doubt that they can describe what they remember.

There is some likelihood, then, that the circularity problem can be met for these three conditions. But there is rather more uncertainty about whether the problem can be avoided when it comes to justifying our knowledge that others want to give accurate testimonies.

Let us now assume that the circularity problem can be met in this case. The implications of this are unexciting. It follows that that wide class of acceptance of testimonies which presupposes that witnesses wish to give accurate reports rests on foundations that do not include testimony.

But if we assume that the circularity problem cannot be met, it follows that very many cases of acceptance of testimony could not be based on what have traditionally been recognized as the ways of knowing viz. observation, deduction, memory and introspection. In other words, a very large class of testimonies would form an ultimate category of knowledge. Someone may react to this by saying that we ought therefore to base our acceptance of all testimonies on Humean correlations, i.e. ultimately on observation. But this is not feasible, for we are unable to make enough of the appropriate observations.

If it is the case that those testimonies in which we rely on the good intentions of the testifier do constitute an ultimate category, it does not follow that we must accept every testimony, any more than it follows that since observation is an ultimate category we must count every

observation as veridical. We should still assess testimonies for the sorts of reasons mentioned in the last section, only a large proportion of these reasons would, in the end, themselves rest on testimony.

## 3. Postcript on the Use of "Testimony" and "Authority"

I have proceeded on the assumption that only witnesses can give testimony, and that a witness is an observer. I was encouraged in this assumption by phrases like "as God's my witness", "witnessed an accident", "events to which he was witness", "eye-witness", "witnessed the signing of a document". These phrases imply that a witness is a perceiver. From this I inferred that anything seen, heard, touched, tasted, felt - whether an emotion or a bodily feeling - could be the subject of testimony. [1]

But I have since been convinced that the above concepts of "testimony" and "witness" are too narrow. For example, a psychiatrist may testify in court as to the current state of professional opinion about a particular sort of patient. The psychiatrist is a witness in a straightforward sense, but observations need form no part of his testimony. Nor is the courtroom setting necessary if X is to be a witness yet not report observations. At a philosophy seminar, a physicist may give an account of a branch of physical theory. We could say that he is a witness for those present about the theories he states. Webster's Third New International Dictionary tells us that a witness need not even be a person - it may merely be something that serves

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[1] In fact it was this inference that made Hume's account of the justification of testimony immediately suspect, because we cannot observe correlations between reports of interior states like feelings and emotions and the states themselves. Of course it is in practice impossible to observe correlations between reports and sightings, hearings, touchings, tastings, but we can make the correlations between the reports and what the sightings etc. are of. But we cannot make the correlation between reports and purely private objects.

as or furnishes evidence or proof. The dictionary cites as an example "prehistoric people left behind material witnesses to their cultures." In this sense, a witness is simply evidence.

Except for this last sense, I classified such witnesses under "authority". However the distinction between a witness and an authority is not as sharp as I supposed. My definition of "authority" - "a person or institution in a position to know" - might serve to define "witness" as well.

Since the concept of "witness" is as wide as this, and and since it is witnesses who give testimony, the diversity of reasons for accepting testimonies is very likely greater than I thought. What would be the reason, typically, for accepting a psychiatrist's report about what professional opinion currently is on a given subject? Presumably, the reason would be that the psychiatrist holds a responsible position in a respected institution, and works in the area in which the subject is.

Although my concept of testimony was a narrow one, there is reason to single it out for special consideration, since testimonies in that sense always put us in direct contact with the facts and testimonies in the wider sense only sometimes do. When we accept the report of an observation, we learn about part of the world, in particular, that part of the world in the perceiver's environment, or within himself. When we accept a testimony in a sense exclusive of "report of observation", we often learn only what some people think that the world is like. We can only reasonably infer from that to what the world is like in case we know that they have reliable means of arriving at what they say. This is obviously the case when people are testifying about theories or opinions. But sometimes testimonies yield information about facts even when they are not reports of observations. For example, we may accept the testimony given by a diplomat about the working of committees in the United Nations, even though we know that he has no direct experience of them - he may have satisfied us that he has close relations with people who have. Once we accept this man as a witness, we

receive information about the operations of one slice of reality. But as this is not always so for witnesses in the wider sense, it is worth considering the justification for relying on witnesses in the narrow sense.

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