

## JOHN HENRY NEWMAN ON MORAL IMAGINATION IN THEOLOGICAL METHOD AND CHURCH TRADITION

In his paper, Gerard Magill maintained that John Henry Newman used the imagination as a mental instrument for creative discernment in his theological method in order to portray the intellectual depth of living faith. Newman construes the imagination as the combination of the dynamic, holistic, and subjective characteristics of discernment, each of which permeate his major works. Magill's reference to the "moral" imagination in the title of his essay alludes to the balance that Newman maintains between the secular and religious realms of discourse in his philosophy and theology. On the one hand, his use of the imagination enables him to maintain a skillful poise in the face of so many conflicting views in the political and religious arena of his day. On the other hand, his achievement remains relevant today insofar as his understanding of the imagination perceptively portrays the mental depth of living faith and therefore promotes the intellectual vitality of theological inquiry.

The plausibility of Newman's view of the imagination is increased in light of his recognition of its inherent dangers. Like Hegel and Feuerbach, Newman was aware of imaginative distortion and delusion (see *Apologia*, 20); in response he explained the legitimate association between the imagination and the perception of concrete reality, thereby anticipating Sartre's dismissal of the imagination as unreal. Newman espouses a creative role for the imagination as epistemologically coherent by coupling its innovative capacity (the dynamic characteristic of discernment) with its synthetic capacity (the holistic characteristic of discernment) in a process of reasoning that is eminently personal (the subjective characteristic of discernment). Hence, he argues that the imagination enables us to apprehend reality meaningfully through converging arguments in an interpretative process that discloses what is within our intellectual range of perception, even though not logically apparent. In matters of doctrine this interpretative process celebrates religious mystery by maintaining a balance between disclosure and concealment.

In similar fashion David Tracy appeals to the imagination by using analogical language to protect the irreducible tension of disclosure and concealment in religion; he argues that the analogical imagination enables us to discern relations (and therefore also the differences) between different realities in a specific tradition and among the plurality of religious traditions (see *The Analogical Imagination* [London, 1981]). Tracy does not refer to the imagination in Newman's thought, though he clearly appreciates the contribution of the *Grammar* as a classic on the critical analysis of faith commitment. Nonetheless, Newman's use of the imagination in his theological method (which appears explicitly in his *Grammar*) complements Tracy's analogical imagination by delineating the three interwoven characteristics of discernment (for example, in recovering church tradition).

These dynamic, holistic, and subjective characteristics of discernment clarify the epistemological function of the imagination in Newman's works and thereby illumine Tracy's strategy for comprehending claims to meaning and truth in theology: to apprehend "depth of meaning" Newman explains that we require "that real ratiocination and present imagination" (*Grammar*, 316). For Tracy meaning and truth in theology emerge from the critical interpretation of church tradition and of contemporary realities in particular situations when we discover "some ordered relationships for understanding the similarities-in-difference in the whole" (*The Analogical Imagination*, 423). I have shown that for Newman the critical interpretation of church tradition and of historical realities requires the holistic characteristic of discernment, and that relating different information in a holistic perspective was the mainstay for furthering knowledge in his philosophy of liberal education. These functions of relating and interpreting information in Newman's appeal to the imagination are consistent with and expand upon Tracy's explanation of the analogical imagination.

Tracy, however, applies the imagination more explicitly than Newman to theological conversation within a specific religious denomination and among diverse traditions of belief. Of course, Newman is sensitive to the interaction between the secular and the religious realms of discourse through the imagination, especially in his view of university education as I have indicated. But Tracy's argument goes further by exploring how the imagination can integrate religious traditions with contemporary culture in the sense of combining church, academy, and society in public discourse. In *Habits of the Heart* (Los Angeles, 1985), Robert N. Bellah adopts a similar strategy for the social sciences by appealing to the "social imagination" in order to advance cultures as "dramatic conversations"; these conversations depend upon the character of those involved to make connections with older ways, not as a capitulation to neotraditionalism, but rather as the "recovery of a genuine tradition, one that is always self-revising and in a state of development" (27, 275, 283).

Newman's insight into the relevance of both intellectual and moral character for an appropriate use of the imagination anticipated these sorts of approaches (Tracy in theology, Bellah in sociology) that envision diverse conversations for advancing culture by appealing to the imagination. For Newman the influence of character upon the imagination enhances such conversation by recovering the vitality of tradition in doctrinal development and theological history; hence his stunning remark in 1845 that hints at his later appeal to the imagination, "(t)here is no other way of learning or of teaching" (*Development*, 55). Newman perceives and nurtures this affinity between imagination and education insofar as his appeal to the imagination in theological method and church tradition is a development of his philosophy of education.

Magill concluded that at the root of Newman's philosophy of liberal education are the dynamic, holistic, and subjective characteristics of discernment, which he applies to his theological method (including his religious epistemology) and to his recovery of church tradition (including his theory of doctrinal development). Magill has suggested that Newman construes the combination of these three characteristics of discernment as an appeal to the imagination, stated most explicitly in the *Grammar*. The term "moral" imagination alludes to the interaction be-

tween the secular and religious realms of discourse, a confluence of ethical, intellectual, and religious meaning that permeates Newman's major works. Newman's achievement, therefore, is to portray the intellectual depth of living faith by prescribing a central role for the imagination in theological method and Church tradition. Moreover, his contribution to scholarship today is to invigorate theology as creative, intellectual inquiry by appeal to the moral imagination.

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