

Conscience, Relativism, and Truth: the Witness of Saint John Henry Newman

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Conscience Today

ON OCTOBER 13, 2019 the Church canonized a man whose life and work has been described by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI as “one great commentary on the question of conscience,”² who was praised by Pope Saint John Paul II for his “deep intellectual honesty [and] fidelity to conscience and grace,”³ and who is celebrated by many as one worthy of

¹ This paper is a slightly revised version of one delivered to the conference on “Newman the Prophet: A Saint for Our Times” conducted by the Pontifical University of St Thomas (Angelicum), Rome, October 12, 2019.

² Joseph Ratzinger, “Conscience and Truth,” in *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 75–100, at 84. Other texts of Ratzinger on conscience include: *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007); “Conscience in Its Age,” in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 165–79; *The Nature and Mission of Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995); *Without Roots: Europe, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, with M. Pera (New York: Basic, 2006), 51–80. See also: Vincent Twomey, *Pope Benedict XVI: The Conscience of Our Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007); Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 39–40, 81–83.

³ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Letter for the Centenary of the Elevation of John Henry Newman to the Cardinalate* (1979): “It is my hope that this centenary will be for all of us an opportunity for studying more closely the inspiring thought of Newman’s genius, which speaks to us of deep intellectual honesty, fidelity to conscience and grace, piety and priestly zeal, devotion to Christ’s Church and love of her doctrine,

the title of Doctor of the Church and specifically “doctor of conscience.”⁴

That such a high authority on conscience is being celebrated in this way could not be more timely: for rights of conscience are regularly flouted today and the very idea of conscience much contested. Some treat it as mere sincerity or subjective intuition; others as personal rivalry with authority; others again dismiss it altogether as mythology. Oxford don Julian Savulescu sounds like Newman’s nineteenth-century denigrators as he writes off appeals to conscience as “idiosyncratic, bigoted, and discriminatory.”⁵ Behind disputes over whether religious or moral believers engaged in healthcare or other pursuits should have the space to pursue their conscientious beliefs, and even have conscience protections,⁶ is the deeper question of the meaning, basis, and scope of conscience, and there is no one better to explore this with than our new saint.

Conscience in Newman’s Day

Newman was heir to a long and rich tradition on conscience going back to Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, and Thomas More.⁷ Joseph Butler mediated

unconditional trust in divine providence and absolute obedience to the will of God” (*L’Osservatore Romano* [English], May 21, 1979).

⁴ E.g.: Drew Morgan, “John Henry Newman, Doctor of conscience, Doctor of the Church?,” *Newman Studies Journal* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 5–23; *John Henry Newman, Doctor of the Church*, ed. Phillippe Lefebvre and Colin Mason (Oxford: Family Publications, 2007).

⁵ E.g.: Julian Savulescu, “Conscientious Objection in Medicine,” *British Medical Journal* 332 (2006): 294–97; Udo Schuklenk, “Conscientious Objection in Medicine: Private Ideological Convictions Must Not Supercede Public Service Obligations,” *Bioethics* 29, no. 5 (2015): ii–iii; J. Savulescu and Udo Schuklenk, “Doctors Have No Right to Refuse Medical Assistance in Dying, Abortion or Contraception,” *Bioethics* 31, no. 3 (2017): 162–70; U. Schuklenk and R. Smalling, “Why Medical Professionals Have No Moral Claim to Conscientious Objection Accommodation in Liberal Democracies,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 43 (2017): 234–40; J. Savulescu and U. Schuklenk, “Conscientious Objection and Compromising the Patient: Response to Hughes,” *Bioethics* 32, no. 7 (2018): 473–76; Doug McConnell, “Conscientious Objection in Healthcare: How Much Discretionary Space Best Supports Good Medicine?,” *Bioethics* 33, no. 1 (2019): 154–61.

⁶ See the special issues of the *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2004)—especially the contributions by M. Kramlich, N. Nikas, E. Furton, M. Latkovic, and P. Cataldo—and *The New Bioethics: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Biotechnology and the Body* 25, no. 3 (Sept 2019), especially the essays of D. Oderberg, M. Neal and S. Fovargue, T. Saad, N. Gamble, and M. Pruski.

⁷ See: Eric D’Arcy, *Conscience and its Right to Freedom* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961); Anthony Fisher, O.P., “Conscience: The crisis of authority,” ch. 2 in *Catholic Bioethics for a New Millennium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

much of that tradition to Newman's generation. He described conscience as "moral Reason, moral Sense, or divine Reason . . . a Sentiment of the Understanding, or a Perception of the Heart" by which an agent reflects on action prospectively or retrospectively, applying moral principles available to all.⁸ Butler reflected the turn away from metaphysical to more psychological explanations of ethics in that age. In Newman's own century new views of conscience were emerging: for Nonconformists, conscience was freedom of religion along with moral constraints on anything that made you smile; for the Kantians, it was stern-faced practical reason holding duty up before the agent for their acquittal or condemnation; for the liberals, it was about "doing it my way" constrained only by law and education; for the Darwinists, an evolved mechanism for managing conflict between competing natural impulses or species; for the Marxists and Nietzscheans, a social policeman, the construct of a controlling community. It was against such a background that Newman sought to teach his version of the tradition on conscience.

His most famous treatment was in his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*,⁹ but we find thoughts on conscience in his sermons, treatises, hymns, even novels. Conscience rates a mention 588 times in his letters and diaries alone. But as with Thomas More, we see in Newman someone not just speculating about moral theory but often personally agonizing over what to do.¹⁰

2012); Douglas Langston, *Conscience and Other Virtues from Bonaventure to MacIntyre* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

⁸ Joseph Butler, "Of the nature of virtue," in *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, 2nd ed. (London: Knapton, 1736), no. 1; see also Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel*, rev. ed. (London: Knapton, 1729), III.6 and XIII.7 (in preface). On Butler on conscience see: S. Darwall, "Conscience as Self-Authorizing in Butler's Ethics," in *Joseph Butler's Moral and Religious Thought: Tercentenary Essays*, ed. C. Cunliffe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 209–42; A. Garrett, "Reasoning about Morals from Butler to Hume," in *Philosophy and Religion in Enlightenment Britain*, ed. R. Savage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 169–86; A. Rorty, "Butler on Benevolence and Conscience," *Philosophy* 53, no. 204 (1978): 171–84; B. Tennant, *Conscience, Consciousness and Ethics in Joseph Butler's Philosophy and Ministry* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2011); Aaron Garrett, "Joseph Butler's Moral Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online* (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/butler-moral/>).

⁹ John Henry Newman, "A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk on the Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation" (1875; hereafter, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*), repr. in *Lectures on Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, vol. 2 (Miami, FL: HardPress, 2013), 175–378.

¹⁰ Some of these quandaries are explored by his biographers and commentators:

Newman gave his witness to Catholic conscience in an environment in which it was not always well-respected. Pope Emeritus Benedict attributes Newman's youthful conversion from rationalism to Christianity to the discovery of "the objective truth of a personal and living God, who speaks to the conscience and reveals to man his condition as a creature." This first conversion—and the subsequent two, to High Churchman and then to Catholic—were not well-received by all. Yet from the Calvinist Thomas Scott he learnt "his determination to adhere to the interior Master with his own conscience, confidently abandoning himself to the Father and living in faithfulness to the recognized truth." Though "he was subjected to many trials, disappointments and misunderstandings, . . . he never descended to false compromises. . . . He always remained honest in his search for the truth, faithful to the promptings of his conscience, and focused on the ideal of sanctity."¹¹

After "pope-ing" in 1845, Newman's honesty was impeached by Reverend Charles Kingsley. This provoked his famous *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, a spiritual autobiography that detailed his tussles of conscience

Frederick Aquino and Benjamin King, *The Oxford Handbook of John Henry Newman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Louis Bouyer, *Newman: His Life and Spirituality* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011); John Cornwell, *Newman's Unquiet Grave: The Reluctant Saint* (London: Continuum, 2010); John Crosby, *The Personalism of John Henry Newman* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014); Eamon Duffy, *John Henry Newman: A Very Brief History* (London: SPCK, 2019); Avery Dulles, *John Henry Newman* (New York: Continuum, 2009); Reinhard Hütter, *John Henry Newman on Truth and its Counterfeits: A Guide for Our Times* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020); Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); *Newman After a Hundred Years*, ed. Ian Ker and Alan Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); *The Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman*, ed. Ian Ker and Terrence Merrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Gerard Skinner, *Newman the Priest—Father of Souls* (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 2010); Roderick Strange, *John Henry Newman: A Mind Alive* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 2008) and *Newman 101: An Introduction to the Life and Philosophy of John Cardinal Newman* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2008); Joyce Sugg, *John Henry Newman: Snapdragon in the Wall* (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 2001); Frank Turner, *John Henry Newman: The Challenge to Evangelical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001); Juan Velez, *Passion for Truth: The Life of John Henry Newman* (Tan, 2012) and *Holiness in a Secular Age: The Witness of Cardinal Newman* (New York: Scepter, 2017).

¹¹ Benedict XVI, "Message to Symposium of the Friends of Newman," November 18, 2010 (www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20101118_newman-friends.html), citing Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ch. 1.

and responded to the accusations of bad faith. A few years later (1852) Newman spoke out against a former Dominican friar, anti-Catholic demagogue, and serial rapist, Giacinto Achilli.¹² Newman was accused, tried and convicted of criminal libel, despite overwhelming evidence from Achilli's victims of the truth of his claims.¹³ He escaped imprisonment, and his fine and court costs—the equivalent of more than 1.5million pounds in today's values—were paid by admirers. But first he received a humiliating tongue-lashing from the judge about his moral deterioration since becoming a Catholic.

Another occasion on which Newman gave witness to conscience was in 1874 when former Prime Minister William Gladstone published a pamphlet declaring that following the Vatican Council the English Catholic was bound "to forfeit his moral and mental freedom, and to place his loyalty and civil duty at the mercy of another."¹⁴ It fell to Newman to defend Catholics against these charges of disloyalty to the nation and subjection to papal tyranny in his "Letter to the Duke of Norfolk."

Newman on the Voice of Conscience

Writing on the occasion of the first centenary of Newman's death, John Paul II observed that Newman's "doctrine on conscience, like his teaching in general, is subtle and whole, and ought not to be oversimplified in its presentation."¹⁵ Rather, Newman's complex account begins with an insis-

¹² John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000; originally 1852).

¹³ *The Times* recognized the verdict for the travesty it was, reporting: "We consider . . . that a great blow has been given to the administration of justice in this country, and Roman Catholics will have henceforth only too good reason for asserting that there is no justice for them in matters tending to rouse the Protestant feelings of judges and juries" (quoted in Wilfrid Ward, *Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman* [Charleston, SC: BiblioLife, 2010], 292). On the trial see: M. C. Mirow, "Roman Catholicism on Trial in Victorian England: The Libel Case of John Henry Newman and Dr Achilli," *Catholic Lawyer* 36, no. 4 (1996): 401–53; Edward Short, "How the Achilli Trial Changed John Henry Newman," *Catholic World Report*, March 18, 2018.

¹⁴ William Gladstone, *Vatican Decrees in Their Bearing on Civil Allegiance: A Political Expostulation* (London: John Murray, 1874), 11.

¹⁵ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Letter on the First Centenary of the Death of John Henry Newman* (1990), §3, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1990/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_19900618_arc-birmingham.html. See also Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Address on the First Centenary of the Death of John Henry Newman* (1990), www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900428_ratzinger-newman_en.html.

tence that there is more to conscience than the English “sense of propriety, self-respect or good taste, formed by general culture, education and social custom. Rather is it the echo of God’s voice within the heart of man, the pulse of the divine law beating within each person as a standard of right and wrong, with an unquestionable authority.”¹⁶ This “voice of God in the nature and heart of man, as distinct from the voice of Revelation”¹⁷ is what Tradition calls the natural law. Conscience applies that law in judgment that “bears immediately on conduct, on something to be done or not done.”¹⁸ Newman begins his account here.

But such obedience to natural conscience can be a preparation for obedience to divine revelation.¹⁹ Thus in his novel *Callista* the saint says:

I feel that God within my heart. I feel myself in His presence. He says to me, “Do this: don’t do that.” You may tell me that this dictate is a mere law of my nature, as it is to joy or to grieve. I cannot understand this. No, it is the echo of a person speaking to me. . . . It carries with it proof of its divine origin. My nature feels towards it as towards a person. When I obey it, I feel a satisfaction; when I disobey, a soreness—just like that which I feel in pleasing or offending some revered friend. . . . An echo implies a voice; a voice a speaker. That speaker I love and I fear.²⁰

In his “Letter to the Duke of Norfolk,” Newman explained whose voice that is:

Conscience is not a long-sighted selfishness, nor a desire to be consistent with oneself; but it is a messenger from Him, Who, both in nature and grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its perempto-

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Letter on the First Centenary*, §3.

¹⁷ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 247.

¹⁸ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 134.

¹⁹ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 8 (Miami, FL: HardPress, 2018; originally 1843), 202: “Obedience to conscience leads to obedience to the Gospel, which, instead of being something different altogether, is but the completion and perfection of that religion which natural conscience teaches.”

²⁰ John Henry Newman, *Callista: A Tale of the Third Century* (1855; BiblioLife, 2010; HardPress, 2013), 314–5. See: Ian Ker, *Newman on Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 134–8; L. Terlinden, “Newman and Conscience,” in Lefebvre and Mason, *John Henry Newman*, 201–19, at 210.

riiness, a priest in its blessings and anathemas, and, even though the eternal priesthood throughout the Church could cease to be, in it the sacerdotal principle would remain and would have a sway.²¹

Yet talk of inner lights and strange voices has a decidedly gnostic or even psychotic feel to it. If we hear voices no one else can hear, we should probably see a doctor or an exorcist! And were conscience really a voice from *outside* our reasoning, it would play no part in moral philosophy and might suggest a double truth in moral theology: my merely human practical reasoning tells me to do X, but my “divine voice” says to do Y, not X.²²

So, does Newman think conscience is like an inbuilt sat-nav, or like the angel who appears on Fred Flintstone’s right shoulder whispering into his right ear about his duty in contradiction to the bad angel whispering temptations into his left—which we must decide whether to obey? Several things might be said about this.

First, conscience is for Newman “a constituent element of the mind” like perception, reasoning, and aesthetic judgment, and its primary function is the rational judgment of the moral sense that interprets human nature.²³ It is the subjective experience of the objective moral law at play in the actor’s life. Its reliable use requires moral education and practice. Here Newman is following the classical notion of *synderesis* and *conscientia* mediating a divine law even to unbelievers. The use of the metaphor of voice, then, is to emphasize that conscience does not invent its own principles but receives and recognizes them.

Secondly, it is this quality of conscience as “the rule of ethical truth, the standard of right and wrong, a sovereign, irreversible, absolute authority in the presence of men and angels”²⁴ that gives it its authority both with respect to the agent—who might otherwise choose the more convenient course—and the state, which should respect the individual not merely as a voter but as a voice of God. “We are accustomed to speaking of conscience as a voice,” Newman explains in the *Grammar of Assent*, “because it is

²¹ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 129.

²² Pope Saint John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, Encyclical Letter on the Church’s Moral Teaching (1993), §56, noted a similar kind of “double truth” operative in attempts to legitimize supposedly “pastoral” solutions to moral dilemmas contrary to objective moral truth and also in seeking personal exceptions in conscience from universally binding norms.

²³ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 248. Cf. See also Gerard Magill, *Religious Morality in John Henry Newman: Hermeneutics of the Imagination* (Cham: Springer, 2015), 199–201.

²⁴ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 246.

so imperative and constraining, like no other dictate in the whole of our experience.”²⁵ Conscience *must* be obeyed: “He who acts against his conscience loses his soul.”²⁶ The metaphor of voice, then, as he puts it in *The Development of Doctrine*, serves to emphasize the “directing power” of conscience.²⁷ Thus, as Pope Benedict has observed, conscience for Newman is both capacity for truth and obedience to that truth, both moral sense and moral judgment.²⁸

Thirdly, natural conscience serves to plant “seeds” of faith and morals in the human soul, so that people are already ordered to receive the Gospel.

It is by the universal sense of right and wrong, the consciousness of transgression, the pangs of guilt, and the dread of retribution, as first principles deeply lodged in the hearts of men, it is thus and only thus, that he has gained his footing in the world and achieved his success.²⁹

Fourthly, once a person has the gift of Christian faith, Newman implies this natural voice is transformed into the Christian sense of responsibility before God. In the *Apologia* Newman says believers would rather follow and, if need be, be wrong with their religious conscience, than follow and be right with their reason.³⁰ Conscience, then, is now recognized as the voice of a God who is known and loved and whose instructions have even more imperative force than before.³¹ “Left to itself and disregarded, it can become a counterfeit of the sacred power it is, and turn into a kind of self-confidence and deference to a person’s own subjective judgment. Newman’s words are unequivocal and perennially valid: ‘Conscience has its rights because it has its duties’”³²—duties to self, to one’s fellows, above all to God. Thus Reinhard Hütter argues

²⁵ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992; originally 1870), 40, 47, 72–83.

²⁶ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 138.

²⁷ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2018; originally 1845), 361. In *Difficulties of Anglicans* Newman describes conscience as “a messenger from Him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil” (2:248).

²⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, 2010.

²⁹ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 132.

³⁰ John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864/1865; BiblioLife, 2010), 455.

³¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §60.

³² John Paul II, *Letter on the First Centenary*, §4, quoting Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 250.

that Newman's understanding of conscience is "essentially theonomic."³³

Fifthly, in response to liberal tendencies of his day, Newman insisted that Christians must form their consciences in accord with the Scriptures, Tradition, and magisterium.

The sense of right and wrong is so delicate, so fitful, so easily puzzled, obscured, perverted, so subtle in its argumentative methods, so impressible by education, so biased by pride and passion, so unsteady in its course, that, in the struggle for existence amid the various exercises and triumphs of the human intellect, this sense is at once the highest of all teachers, yet the least luminous; and the Church, the Pope, the Hierarchy are, in the Divine purpose, the supply of an urgent demand.³⁴

Ecclesiastical authority, on this account, is not so much an external force commanding us to act against our best judgments, but rather a divinely ordained assistance for rooting out errors in our moral reasoning which the faithful willingly appropriate.³⁵ Famous for agreeing to toast the pope but only after toasting conscience first, Newman did not overstate the roles either of the magisterium or of personal conscience, but demonstrated their service to each other and the role of each in articulating God's purposes.³⁶

Sixthly, if the light of reason and/or revelation is properly given to the intellect, conscience is then a property or function of the intellect. Yet in many places in Newman conscience seems to be a quality of the will as much as or more than of the intellect. This helps explain Newman's prefer-

³³ Reinhard Hütter, "Conscience 'Truly So Called' and Its Counterfeit: John Henry Newman and Thomas Aquinas on What Conscience Is and Why It Matters," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 12, no 3 (2014): 701–67, at 703: "Conscience is not simply a human faculty, but is in its root constituted by the eternal law, the Divine Wisdom communicated to the human intellect. It is upon its theonomic nature and upon it alone that the prerogatives and the supreme authority of conscience are founded" (see also 707–8).

³⁴ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 132.

³⁵ Ryan Marr, "Newman Contra Liberalism: Conscience, Authority, and the Infidelity of the Future," *Public Discourse*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/07/54164/>.

³⁶ On reading this highly contentious remark see: Benedict XVI, Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, 2010; Austin Cooper, O.M.I., "Newman and the Magisterium," in Lefebvre and Mason, *John Henry Newman*, 173–87; Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 418; John Finnis, "Conscience in the Letter to the Duke of Norfolk," in Ker and Hill, *Newman After a Hundred Years*, 401–18; Magill, *Religious Morality in John Henry Newman*, 199.

ence for the analogy of a voice rather than light for conscience. Reverence for and obedience to this “voice” make for sound conscience; self-sufficiency (“I loved to choose”), rebelliousness (“pride ruled my will”), and sensuality (“I loved the garish day”), on the other hand, distort judgment and behavior.³⁷

The sound action of conscience thus requires a conversion or purification not just of intellect but also of will, a putting on of the mind and heart of Christ, to follow Paul’s language, a trusting in the lead of the Kindly Light, not merely the consistent application of self-evident (or should-be-evident) principles. And without subjecting ourselves to the Church, which is the “undaunted and the only defender” of truth, conscience easily fades, as Newman puts it in *The Idea of the University*.³⁸

Newman on Conscience in the Contemporary Magisterium

It is here, at the intersection of the sovereignty of conscience and the fragility of conscience without guidance, that we find Newman’s answer to the questions of relativism and truth which so often cloud discussion around his thinking. In his tussle with Gladstone, Newman insisted that the pope’s authority rests precisely on the authority of conscience—for his magisterium is there to serve the consciences of the faithful by forming and informing them—and so can never contradict conscience without “cutting the ground from under his feet.” What’s more, he pointed out, the teaching of popes is mostly general and the judgments of conscience particular, so it is hard to see how they could conflict.³⁹

The idea of making Newman a bishop had been abandoned long before the First Vatican Council, and he was unwilling to attend as a *peritus*.⁴⁰ He was very present at the Second Council, however, held long after his death. That Council readily adopted his language of the voice, echo, messenger, or sanctuary of conscience. In *Gaudium et Spes* the Council fathers said:

³⁷ See John Henry Newman, “Lead Kindly Light Amid the Encircling Gloom,” in *Verses on Various Occasions* (Miami, FL: HardPress, 2019; originally 1867).

³⁸ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976; originally 1852/1858), 414. See also Joseph Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006), 148.

³⁹ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 221–52, 256–57.

⁴⁰ B. C. Butler, O.S.B., “Newman and the Second Vatican Council,” <http://vatican2voice.org/3butlerwrites/newman.htm>; George Weigel, “Newman and Vatican II,” *Catholic World Report*, April 15, 2015 (available at firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/04/newman-and-vatican-ii); Ian Ker, *Newman on Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is his very dignity; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man: there he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths.⁴¹

Conscience featured fifty-two times in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The Council taught that:

- Human dignity consists in being creatures who by nature have the God-like ability to reason and choose. Thus all people are bound to seek, embrace and live the truth faithfully.⁴²
- Every human agent has the capacity for and fundamental principles of conscience. Conscience is experienced as an inner “voice,” ‘sanctuary’ or “tribunal,” yet one which mediates a universal moral law which is objectively given (by nature, reason, God) rather than personally invented.⁴³
- Thus conscience summons us to inscribe the divine law in every aspect of life by seeking good and avoiding evil, loving God and neighbour, keeping the commandments and universal norms of morality.⁴⁴
- To follow a well-formed conscience is not merely a right but a duty: persons are judged according to how they form and follow particular judgments of conscience.⁴⁵
- Whether because of their own fault or not, agents may err in

⁴¹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, §16. See also: John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §54; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], §§1778, 1795.

⁴² Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, §§1–2; *Gaudium et Spes*, §§16, 41. See also John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §31.

⁴³ Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, §3; *Gaudium et Spes*, §16. See also: John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§52–57; *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), §§29, 40; CCC, §§1778, 1795.

⁴⁴ Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, §3; *Gaudium et Spes*, §§16, 43, 74, 79; *Lumen Gentium*, §36; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, §5. See also: John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§52–57; *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), §§29, 40; CCC, §§1778, 1795.

⁴⁵ Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, §§1, 11; *Gaudium et Spes*, §16. See also: John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§58–61; CCC, §§1778, 1798–1800.

matters of conscience.⁴⁶ Catholics should therefore seek to form their consciences so that they are “dutifully conformed to the divine law itself and submissive toward the Church’s teaching office, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel.”⁴⁷

- Claims of personal freedom or of obedience to civil laws or superiors do not excuse a failure to abide by the universal principles of conscience.⁴⁸
- Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion should be respected by civil authorities and people should not be coerced in matters of religion.⁴⁹

Suffice it to say that this teaching is very much in the tradition of Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, More—and Newman. Pope Saint Paul VI attributed to Newman’s wisdom much of the Council’s thinking in this area.⁵⁰ Subsequent popes have regularly praised Newman’s contribution on conscience and drawn upon it.⁵¹ He is quoted directly in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and *Veritatis Splendor* in their treatments of conscience.⁵²

Newman on Conscience in Contemporary Society

If Newman’s influence on the Church’s understanding of conscience

⁴⁶ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §§8, 16, 43, 47, 50. See also: John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§62–63; CCC, §§1799–1801; CCC §§1799–1801.

⁴⁷ Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, §§8, 14; *Gaudium et Spes*, §§31, 50, 87; *Gravissimum Educationis*, §1; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, §20; *Inter Mirifica*, §9, 21. See also: John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §64; CCC, §11798.

⁴⁸ Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, §8; *Gaudium et Spes*, §79. See also: John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §32.

⁴⁹ Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, §3; *Gaudium et Spes*, §79; *Gravissimum Educationis*, §1, 6, 8.

⁵⁰ Pope Saint Paul VI, Address to Symposium on John Henry Newman, April 7, 1975. See also Ker, *Newman on Vatican II*.

⁵¹ E.g.: St Paul VI, Address to Symposium on John Henry Newman, 1975); John Paul II, *Letter on the Centenary of the Elevation of John Henry Newman to the Cardinalate* (1979); John Paul II, *Letter on the Centenary of the Death of John Henry Newman* (1990); John Paul II, Address to Symposium on the Centenary of John Henry Newman, April 27, 1990); John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*; John Paul II, *Letter on the Second Centenary of the Birth of John Henry Newman* (2001); Benedict XVI, Address to Prayer Vigil on the Eve of the Beatification of John Henry Newman, September 18, 2010; Benedict XVI, Homily for the Mass of Beatification of John Henry Newman, September 19, 2010; Message to Symposium of the Friends of Newman 2010; Christmas Address to the Roman Curia 2010.

⁵² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §34; CCC, §1778.

is clear, has he also affected civil understandings? Several authors have recently explored how Newman's writings on conscience influenced the thinking and action of Sophie Scholl, leader of the White Rose resistance movement under Nazism.⁵³ In 1942 she gave two volumes of Newman's sermons as a parting gift to her boyfriend, Fritz Hartnagel, as he was sent to the Eastern Front. From the horrors of the battlefield Fritz wrote to Scholl that Newman's writings were "like drops of precious wine."⁵⁴ Many others were also influenced by Newman's teachings on conscience and took heroic stances for the truth at risk to their safety and comfort.

Yet conscience today is more often asserted in defense of following personal inclinations according to a subjectivist or relativist ethic. Servais-Théodore Pinckaers noted that in Catholic circles "a certain allergic aversion to law [has] shifted the center of gravity in moral theology away from law and toward personal freedom, the individual subject and conscience."⁵⁵ "Follow your conscience" has come to be code for pursuing personal preferences in sexuality, bioethics, remarriage, and Church practice.⁵⁶ The language of "the primacy of conscience," unknown to the tradition from Paul to Newman, more often implies contest with Catholic teaching than with the spirit of the age or culture.⁵⁷ This is not the Christian conception

⁵³ Dermot Fenlon, "From the White Star to the White Rose: Newman and the Conscience of the State," in *Realisation—Verwirklichung und Wirkungsgeschichte: Studien zur Grundlegung der praktischen Theologie nach John Henry Newman*, ed. Günter Biemer and Bernd Trocholepczy (Frankfurt: Graf, 2010); Paul Shrimpton, *Conscience Before Conformity: Hans and Sophie Scholl and the White Rose Resistance in Nazi Germany* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2018); K. V. Turley, "How John Henry Newman's writing fought the Nazis," *National Catholic Register*, August 29, 2019, citing Fenlon, Shrimpton, and Marr (see note 34 for Marr).

⁵⁴ Turley, "How John Henry Newman's writing," quoting Marr.

⁵⁵ Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *Morality: The Catholic View* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2003), 56–57.

⁵⁶ On these see: David Bohr, *In Christ a New Creation* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1993), 170; John Finnis, "Conscience, Infallibility and Contraception," *The Month*, 239 (1978): 410–17; Finnis, "IVF and the Catholic Tradition," *The Month* 246 (1984): 55–58; Finnis, "Faith and morals': a Note," *The Month* 21/2 (1988), 563–67; Germain Grisez, John Finnis, and William E. May, "Indissolubility, Divorce and Holy Communion," *New Blackfriars* 75 (June 1994): 321–30.

⁵⁷ See, for example: Richard Gula, "Conscience," in *Christian Ethics*, ed. Bernard Hoose (London: Cassall, 1998), 114; L. Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition* (New York: Paulist, 2002); James Keenan, *Commandments of Compassion* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 1999), 112, 134; A. Patrick, *Liberating Conscience: Feminist Explorations in Catholic Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1996).

of conscience at all: as Ratzinger observed, it is rather “a cloak thrown over human subjectivity, allowing man to elude the clutches of reality.”⁵⁸

Newman was alert to this tendency. “In this century,” he said, conscience “has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it, if they had. It is the right of self-will, . . . an Englishman’s prerogative to be his own master in all things.”⁵⁹

When men [today] advocate the rights of conscience, they in no sense mean the rights of the Creator, nor the duty to Him, . . . but the right of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting, according to their judgment or their humour, without any thought of God at all. They do not even pretend to go by any moral rule, but they demand . . . for each to be his own master in all things, and to profess what he pleases, asking no one’s leave, and accounting priest or preacher, speaker or writer, unutterably impertinent, who dares to say a word against his going to perdition, if he like it, in his own way. . . . Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations.⁶⁰

Thus Newman already saw how revelation, Tradition, community, even reason itself, could progressively be seen as adversaries of the free agent. Instead of being informed by right reason and Church teaching, appeals to conscience were more and more about personal preference.

He argued prophetically that conscience is only worthy of our respect because it is about hearing the truth and obeying God. But “left to itself, though it tells truly at first, it soon becomes wavering, ambiguous, and false; it needs good teachers and good examples to keep it up to the mark and the line of duty; and the misery is, that these external helps, teachers, and examples are in many instances wanting.”⁶¹ In critiquing misconceptions of conscience, Newman argued that just as the value of memory is

⁵⁸ Ratzinger, “Conscience and truth,” 79. See also John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §32–33.

⁵⁹ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 130.

⁶⁰ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 250.

⁶¹ John Henry Newman, “Discourse 5: Saintliness the standard of Christian principle,” in *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2002; originally 1849), 83.

in remembering accurately, so the value of conscience is in yielding right judgment and godly action. Truth always had primacy for him.

The Second Vatican Council followed Newman's lead in celebrating the dignity of conscience, but also habitually qualified the word with adjectives such as "right," "correct," "well-formed," "upright," or "Christian"—allowing that not a few consciences are confused, deformed, secularized, or otherwise misleading.⁶² Conscience often goes astray, sometimes inevitably, that is, by no fault of the agent and so without losing its dignity; but at other times voluntarily, that is, because of negligence or vice, in which case conscience is degraded.⁶³ It taught that:

In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. For the Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origins in human nature itself. . . . The disciple is bound by a grave obligation toward Christ, his Master, ever more fully to understand the truth received from Him, faithfully to proclaim it, and vigorously to defend it, never—be it understood—having recourse to means that are incompatible with the spirit of the Gospel. At the same time, the charity of Christ urges him to love and have prudence and patience in his dealings with those who are in error or in ignorance with regard to the faith.⁶⁴

In response to the view that the Catholic conscience might come to conclusions at odds with the magisterium, Newman said: "Natural Religion . . . needs, in order that it may speak to mankind with effect and subdue the world, to be sustained and completed by Revelation."⁶⁵ "At first our conscience tells us, in a plain and straightforward way, what is right and what is wrong; but when we trifle with this warning, our reason becomes perverted and comes in aid of our wishes, and deceives us

⁶² E.g. Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, §§5, 20; *Inter Mirifica*, §§9, 21; *Gravissimum Educationis*, §1; *Lumen Gentium*, §36; *Gaudium et Spes*, §§16, 26, 43, 50, 52, 76, 87.

⁶³ See John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§62–63.

⁶⁴ Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, §14.

⁶⁵ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 254.

to our ruin.”⁶⁶ It is Church teaching that keeps conscience to its proper course.⁶⁷

Thus on the eve of Newman’s beatification Pope Benedict noted that:

At the end of his life, Newman would describe his life’s work as a struggle against the growing tendency to view religion as a purely private and subjective matter, a question of personal opinion. Here is the first lesson we can learn from his life: in our day, when an intellectual and moral relativism threatens to sap the very foundations of our society, Newman reminds us that, as men and women made in the image and likeness of God, we were created to know the truth, to find in that truth our ultimate freedom and [deepest] fulfilment.⁶⁸

Doctor of Conscience

This short paper has barely scratched the surface of Newman’s teaching on conscience as the voice of God. Much is made of his insistence that conscience be respected and followed above all else. Yet on his account the authority of conscience lies in its pointing us to moral and religious truth, and prompting us to follow the divine will. Far from being a cause or excuse for relativism, then, conscience is its ultimate rejection. But because conscience is also relativism’s most vulnerable target, Newman insists on the Church’s role as its defender and formator. This brought a young *peritus* at the Second Vatican Council named Father Ratzinger to see that, without Church authority, conscience is the ready slave of personal passion and social fashion—what he would famously dub “the dictatorship of relativism.”

On the centenary of the saint’s death, the now grown-up Cardinal Ratzinger paid tribute to Newman’s “liberating and essential” truth that the “we” of the Church develops from and guarantees the “me” of personal conscience. For conscience, on Newman’s account, is above all about discipleship: the implicit discipleship of those who hear and respond to God unknowing, as they follow their best reason in their choices; and the

⁶⁶ Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 8:67.

⁶⁷ Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, 132 (among others places in the *Letter*).

⁶⁸ Benedict XVI, Address to Prayer Vigil on the Eve of the Beatification of John Henry Newman 2010. See also his Benedict XVI, Christmas Address to the Roman Curia 2010, and John Paul II, *Letter on the First Centenary*, 4: “Few people championed the full rights of conscience as he did; few writers pleaded so persuasively on behalf of its authority and liberty, yet he never allowed any trace of subjectivism or relativism to taint his teaching.”

explicit discipleship of the faithful, who know that conscience, guided by the Gospel and the Church, is our surest guide.

St John Henry Newman, Doctor of Conscience—pray for us!

N·V