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Newman's Theorem

Transcription by R. Doran

Newman's Theorem

1 J.H. Newman, *The Idea of a University*

Fergal McGrath, *The Consecration of Learning, Lectures on Newman's "Idea of a University,"* Dublin, Gill & Son, 1962

2 Newman's theorem is the major premise in Newman's argument. The theorem is:
omission of a part of knowledge involves

- (a) ignorance of that part
- (b) mutilation of the whole
- (c) distortion of the remainder.

Newman uses the theorem in the argument which adds the minor premise:
theology is a part of knowledge.

Fr. McGrath would say that the theorem is universally valid.

Our concern will be

- (a) not to prove the theorem but to illustrate it
- (b) to indicate the possibility of extending it
- (c) to point out its negative character (mutilation, distortion).

3 Is knowledge a whole that can be mutilated?

Is it like a quart of milk or like an organism?

(a) Piaget's theory of learning

The element in learning is 'adaptation,' which involves the two elements of assimilation: the use of what one already can do, already understands, already knows

adjustment: the added modification to fit the present case .

Adaptation differentiates rudimentary operations; adaptations yield a series of differentiated operations; differentiated operations are combined; combinations are explored to form groups; groups are fused into higher groups.

To know is to have learned; and learning yields a structured whole; therefore, knowledge is a structured whole.

(b) The disproportion between experience and knowledge

Knowledge ranges over the universe; but knowledge has to have a basis in experience, else it is not distinguished from mere imagining, guessing, theorizing; and our experience is limited to an extremely limited time-volume of data.

Knowledge to be based on experience has to be organized and structured out from a narrow basis.

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(c) The nature of judgment

When one makes a mistake, one says: 'I never thought of that.'

Judgment supposes that one takes into account everything that is relevant to the prospective judgment.

Hence, one is in a position to judge on an issue, only in so far as one knows all that is relevant to the issue.

Further, one is in position to judge that one is not ready to pronounce, only in the measure that one knows what is or might be relevant and yet one does not know about that.

Judging presupposes wisdom that orders all things, that involves at least a scheme of the universe (age of reason; minor).

But one does not know about X if one cannot make judgments about X; and one can make the judgments only in virtue of a universal scheme that orders all; hence, knowledge has to be an organized, structured whole.

(d) The hermeneutic circle

One can understand the whole only by understanding the parts, and one can understand the parts only by understanding the whole.

Words, sentence, paragraph, chapter, book, books by the same author, cultural milieu, history of that milieu, relation of that history to my milieu.

The hermeneutic circle reveals the organized nature of knowledge.

4 Does omission of a part result in distortion? [Handwritten: Horizon]

To omit is a part does not mean that its place remains vacant; it means that other disciplines move in to fill up the vacuum, that other disciplines start giving the answers to questions that do not fall within their competence.

Omit theology: the questions that regard religion are taken over by psychologists, psychotherapists, sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists, historians of culture, historians of religion, literature (Lanson, Romantisme), art, periodicals, the press.

Omit philosophy: foundations of mathematics, foundations of physics, philosophy of science, of history, of life, of art, of language, of law, of the state, of religion, of education

All are worked out not by philosophers but by specialists.

Omit theology and philosophy, and then choose between literary and scientific studies.

C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, The Rede Lecture 1959, Cambridge Univ. Press 1959.

F. R. Leavis, *Two Cultures?* New York, Pantheon [America 4 V 63 p632).

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5 Extension of Newman's theorem. The disintegration of community

Community presupposes a 'common sense,' a field of common meaning.

If different groups within a community omit different parts of knowledge, then there arise opposed collective delusions:

different groups will have different blind spots (ignorance of a part)

they will have differently mutilated wholes

they will have differently distorted remainders.

Hence, they will approach the same common problems differently, with different ends in view, with different acceptable procedures or remedies, to propose different or opposed solutions

Problems keep recurring, and the differences will generate mutual incomprehension, mutual suspicion, mutual hostility. There will develop opposed defensive and then offensive organs, strategies, tactics.

If one group gains the upper hand, then the others become under-privileged, depressed, backward; they are due either to rebel or to be liquidated.

6 Perhaps enough has been said to illustrate the meaning and significance of Newman's theorem.

It remains that the theorem itself is couched in negative terms.

It does not say what a whole is but stress[es] the fact that a whole can be mutilated.

It does not say how different parts positively reinforce and complement one another, but it stresses the fact that omission of a part involves a distortion of the remainder.

It would seem that we must go on to the positive aspect of the matter.