John Henry Newman

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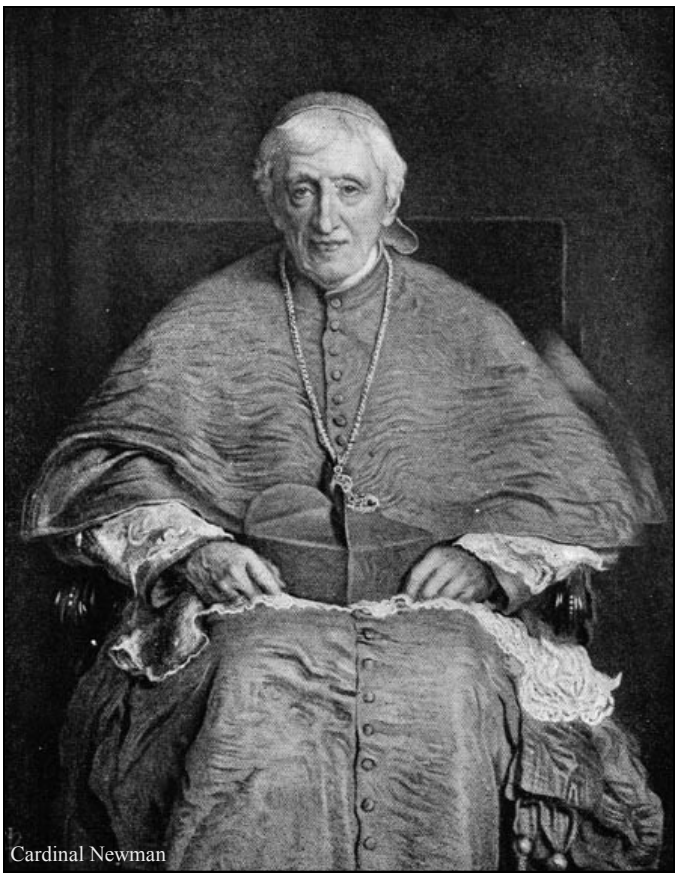
An Idea of a University Department


Cardinal Newman

An Interview with
James Matthew Wilson

The Publican of Philadelphia **had the opportunity to sit down with James Matthew Wilson, Assistant Professor in the Humanities Department at Villanova University and an editor of** ***Front Porch Republic****,* to discuss his Department in particular and John Henry Newman's thoughts on the university in general. What follows is an edited version of that interview.

The Publican of Philadelphia (TPP): So James, I was thinking we could discuss both the Humanities Department at Villanova, which, from what I know, is very encouraging indeed, and also Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University*.

James Matthew Wilson (JW)*:* I'll start with the department just because; even though I can't necessarily say something interesting about it right away I can give some thoughts on it; which is probably best done by simply saying that the existence of something like the Humanities Department at Villanova is not merely exciting, but also seems to me to be one of the few, definite and truly ambitious projects that any Catholic university has undertaken in a great number of years. I can hardly imagine another Catholic school undertaking something like this, even places like Notre Dame are very willing to start off small programs or create a center or something like that. But to create a free standing academic department that has as its foundation the reinsertion into academic life of reflection on the relationship of faith and reason as its very foundation stone is a pretty amazing thing.

That is again, to say that a school would be so bold as not merely to create a center or an institute but actually to create as a full autonomous unit within the faculty a department is quite rare. So, to start right off the bat, that's one of the best things about Villanova, is that it's actually possible for someone to try something like this, especially at a time when other places are ceasing from any kind of adventure or experimentation.

TPP: But what of the Department itself, beyond the fact that its existence is itself impressive?

JW: So what's so great about the Department? I would say it presents itself in probably three distinct terms, and maybe I'll increase that

number to four in a second, we'll see.

The first one is as a department that's explicitly committed to the exploration of faith and reason. So Catholic universities love to talk about the complementarity of faith and reason, but they tend to underscore this relation precisely so that they can justify as acceptably Catholic all kinds of effectively not reasonable but rationalistic projects. "We need to expand our grant applications and research budget for the physical sciences" a school might say, "because that's part of what a Catholic university does: faith and *reason*." But of course what that really is, is a kind of rationalization to excuse you from having to think about the humanistic disciplines at all, and just to follow the trend of turning universities into sort of feeders for a technocratic order, an order ultimately beholden to technology.

So the fact that we're a department of humanities that's explicitly talking about faith and reason and not simply using faith and reason as a way to whitewash otherwise doubtful activities is pretty exciting. So that's one aspect.

The second one is related to the sciences, the fact that it's called the Department of Humanities. Somebody once said to me, "Are you sure it's a Department of Humanities that students need? It may be a Department of Divinities." By the time we were done talking he understood that talking about the humanities is talking about the "divinities," as we do it.

I think when the department was founded the original plan for it was inspired directly by John Paul II, and particularly by his vision of a Christian humanism, which beginning with his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, teaches that "man cannot know himself without love," and in fact it's the being-in-relation with God that is a relationship of love that actually reveals man to himself. This follows from Augustine's method in the *Confessions*: if you want to know yourself, you can't know yourself without knowing God *first*. So, the Department of Humanities, in many ways, is a department of theological anthropology,

asking questions about the human person in the context of faith and reason.

If this project presumes that to talk about humanity implies responding to the idea of God, it's given its currency or its present occasion by our culture which puts in question the very idea of a human person. I saw not too long ago an article on something to the effect of, "what is post-humanism?" And I haven't had the chance to read what the author said yet. But there would be two immediate definitions of post-humanism, that is to say, that term is often used to describe our current condition in, again, one of two ways. One would be the idea of the triumph of the sciences, the fact that so much of the material conditions, and even the emotional conditions, of human life are increasingly subject to manipulation by technology and by biotechnology that these things are being significantly altered at least in their appearances. The prospect of living an extra twenty years does that, the prospect of retarding aging entirely does that, and long before we learned how to extend life, the prospect of surgically and chemically killing off life in the womb changed that condition.

One can say, when so much of human life is deemed rightly subject to domination by technology and the human choices that control technology, then in some serious way the human condition has changed; so, arguably, we have entered into a post-human era. This is probably the older style of post-humanism, but it is also the most current, because so much of what old science fiction writers thought of as the post-human era is very much upon us: when most children are medicated and no longer, perhaps, know what it would mean to be depressed, because they just know what it means to be chemically dependent.

That's one version. The other version of post-humanism is derived from that. It's old history to say that the rise of the regime of technology in our age was driven by a quest to establish some kind of self-grounded or pure human reason; such was the rise of what most of us would call "rationalism" as distinguished from "reason." So, the drive to technology was preceded by the drive to rationalism with the famous suspects being Francis Bacon in England and Rene Descartes in France. What did they both contribute?

Well, Rene Descartes said only that is truly rational that can be known with the certitude of self-demonstrating mathematics, *apodictic* is the necessary word.

And Francis Bacon said that that is reasonable that can be subject to some kind of empirical investigation. I would probably tend to speak of David Hume more than Francis Bacon in this regard. But that is how Bacon and Descartes are thought of. So between them you get *mathematicism* and *empiricism*. Sense experience and mathematical precision brought together gives you the new scientific method and its criterion.

So it's clear that prior to the rise of the regime of technology there was an ascendency of some version of pure reason. Which means self-grounded human reason and that kind of self-grounded pure reason is in fact in one key respect not pure at all: it actually marks the desire of human beings to abandon truth in itself and to subordinate the use of the intellect to various kinds of practical ends, usually entailing human domination or control over something else, someone else, or ourselves.

With the loss of what Aristotle called the speculative dimension of the human intellect, an overriding imperative to turn to the practical became normal. This project was practically successful; that is to say, following on Descartes and Bacon, or Descartes and Hume (however you want to put it), we really did see a rise in technological progress to the point where our lives are practically ruled by it now. And yet, while this testifies to how practically successful the idea of a self-grounded reason was, the criticisms of Nietzsche and other thinkers have shown, as an avenue of actually knowing the truth this kind of modern rationalism is extremely faulted. It lies at its base upon false premises that are easily pulled out from underneath it like a rug. And while this does nothing to belie the practical success of reason, or this modern rationalism, it does everything to call into question its actual truth-value.

From this we get, beginning with Nietzsche, and continuing especially in French and Continental philosophy, the rise of another form of post-humanism, which is one that calls into question the fundamental assumptions at the root of modern philosophy and modern thought more

generally— calling into question the idea of man as a "thinking thing" or a rational animal, calling into question the intelligibility of the world; and, above all, I suppose, calling into question the integrity or identity of the human person as a real being, as an entity.

Going back to Nietzsche, you find the beginnings of the critique of the idea of a human person; the "ego" or the "I" of Descartes being attacked as actually just a sort of epiphenomenon, behind which lies all kinds of subconscious or subterranean forces that are not in themselves coherent—that don't ultimately unite into some kind of "I." So, if you're a philosophical materialist inspired by Darwin, it's just a series of urges for self-preservation that don't actually amount to you, they just are there, and they've resulted in you, but they don't belong to you. Or, if you're a Nietzsche, reality and the self come to be understood as just a purposefully, meaningfully incoherent complex of forces that operate exclusively in terms of power. The latter—that is the Nietzschean understanding of a superannuation of the "I", the Cartesian ego—is what characterizes the other trend in post-humanism. Again, this is especially in French Continental philosophy where we see this: the calling into question of the human being as having any sort of intelligibility to himself or unity to himself.

TPP: So much for post-humanism and the import of the Department's theological-anthropological approach in the face of it, what else of the Department?

JW: So, that aspect of the department feeds into the third attribute I want to mention, which is the way in which we structure our curriculum—not around Great Books but a series of questions that go to the heart of discovering what is the meaning and purpose of human life. Every student in our department takes a class called "God" where the students are forced to confront the question—not simply, "Is there a God?"—but what does it mean to believe in Him?

It is entirely plausible to make a claim, as David Hume did in the Eighteenth Century, that the existence of God makes no difference. Most

people live that way, even if they don't believe that. Liberal society is basically constructed to make what Hume took to be a fact, possible. Hume said, "In practice, it makes no difference whether there is a God, human life is just so predictable and so intuitive and instinctive that what we think doesn't really matter; it's just what we do." That was in the Eighteenth Century, but of course he and his fellows in the Enlightenment designed the beginnings of modern liberal society, which committed itself to finding a way, by means of government or bureaucratic forces, to make it possible for no questions of any burning existential significance to matter to human life; to push those questions out of the public sphere and say, "Oh, these are just nice private choices"; and then to ever decrease the total "square footage", as it were, that private life actually occupies until it becomes almost insignificant.

Far from doing that—from relegating questions of the human person to the private sphere—we, again, have our students take these four courses, called "God", "Person", "Society", "World", where they are asking fundamental questions about the nature of God, the nature of the human being, the human being that is a political animal in society… and then "World"—which I think is, in some respects, the most important class in the sequence—takes its bearings from Aristotle's *Physics*, to try to recover a true philosophy of nature. Aristotle helps us to stand outside of what most people think of as the limits of inquiry into that which exists, which to the modern mind is reducible to the physical sciences. In fact the physical sciences are constituted by all kinds of assumptions that remain invisible to almost everyone involved in them—especially invisible to everyone who is beholden to the sciences because of the good things they give us but is not scientifically educated.

Above all, then, Aristotle's *Physics* serves in that course to introduce the students to the concept of finality or *telos*—that to describe the world as "nature" means not simply to describe what is there as a matter of fact, which is how we often describe nature and how the scientist uses the word "nature". But also to describe the world as nature in the sense of "What is the nature of things?" "Towards what do they tend?" In order to ask about the meaning of anything or the real identity of anything,

you have to ask not simply "What does it look like?" in its sort-of factitious presence, but "What is it for?" "What is its purpose?" And unless you can do that convincingly, not just in a theology course, not just in a philosophy course, but in a *natural* philosophy course, understanding that all things, including the growth of flowers, has to be understood in terms of "What is it for?" "What is the *telos* of the thing?" Unless you can make that case, then there is no way that you can make a lasting and adequate defense of human life and of human nature.

Those things together—and that's a lot that the Humanities Department tries to do!—is all but unprecedented. We have seen in the last fifteen or twenty years attempts at other Catholic universities to rebuild a sense of "Catholic identity." Sometimes that will be manifest in a Catholic Studies Department, which in and of itself is harmless enough, maybe even good—but, of course, can often be incredibly harmful; because if Catholic Studies takes its place along Irish Studies, African American Studies, and Gay Studies, then what one is more or less doing is leaving open the possibility that ultimately all human life and all of the things that accost us in the course of our lives, including our identities and including the identity of God, is actually reducible to a kind of sociology, reducible to the level of culture. If that happens, then it is actually self-defeating. If a Catholic school produces such a program and treats it as just an outgrowth of literature or an outgrowth of anthropology or sociology or history, then ultimately, it has the effect of reducing Catholicism in the students' minds, and indeed in the minds of the faculty, to history or culture. The reduction of everything to culture and experience has been one of the great catastrophes of modern life.

Another practice would be to introduce some kind of "Great Books" seminar, which we actually have at Villanova, and which is very good, but it's not enough by itself. It's too easy to teach a Great Books course and introduce students to all the magnanimous, the great-souled, beings of the Western tradition and to leave it as a matter of total indifference which, if any, of these great souls was actually right about something.

Nobody denies the bizarre, almost monstrous greatness of Immanuel Kant but it does not seem clear that he was correct about anything—though many people would disagree with me there! To read *The Critique of Pure Reason* alongside, say, some questions from Thomas Aquinas' *De Veritate* does not necessarily lead the students arrive at an understanding of what Truth is. It just lets them know what these two supposedly great men had to say.

That is one of the risks that occurs with a Great Books curriculum. Villanova's Great Books seminar, the Augustine and Culture Seminar, tries to minimize that sort of historical relativism or "great-souled" theory of education by highlighting St. Augustine, giving him a sort of privileged place that in turn helps the students to form a more coherent vision of the story of truth. No kind of material, of course, can overcome the force of a professor who reduces the claim-to-truth of an author to a mere cultural episode to be understood but never seriously considered. Patrick Deneen has made this criticism, as did Alasdair MacIntyre long before him.

What actually happens in Great Books education may be understood as follows. If it really matters, as a matter of physics, as a matter of natural philosophy, to try to understand the nature of things, not in terms of what they are in their present state as facts, but what they are as in, "What is their *telos*?", "What is their meaning and purpose?"—then it is surely the case that all education has a *telos.* Implicitly or explicitly, every school has a vision of what is the character of the student that school is trying to produce. And on this basis we may contrast the Great Books vision with the Humanities Department one.

I would see the Great Books *telos* of the human person as being simply the creation of persons who can ask important questions. That's all right, and indeed may exhaust the imagination of most people, but it is clear that the end or purpose of human life is not simply to ask questions about things. If it were, then we would not require answers to them and there would be a sort of infinite regress, a generation of question after question. In fact, this infinite regress has been explicitly acknowledged by the antecedents of Great Books programs. Matthew

Arnold, in defining this mode of humanism, said that culture is endless development, and so did Goethe; Arnold was borrowing the German Romantic's phrase. This "endless progress" sounds so good to some of us, because so much of our life is dominated by an unquestioning, superstitious, indeed slave-like, love of the goods that technology brings us, and that modern bureaucracies can bring us. It seems very easy for us not to want to question anything, which leads to the creation of very empty or shallow persons. In reaction against superstitious and superficial materialism, the Great Books curriculum suggests to people that the great men of history have devoutly asked fundamental questions and philosophized with a kind of persistent and poetic genius. What a relief, some of us say, that one may at least speculate about matters beyond survival and pleasure!

My use of the word "poetic" is, I suppose, the rub of all of this. That is, we tend to think of a great novelist or a great film maker as an artist who produces an untold number of works. He may write one great book in his life; he may produce three dozen. Each of them is great and each of those books contributes to the greatness of the author, we tend to think. But no book is essential. What remains essential is the identity of the author. Therefore, the content of no book is essential, or the truth of any of them is not essential. Indeed, when we turn back to the author, we realize it is not the truths he stated that makes him great, but simply the greatness of his expression—his act of personal making or *poesis*—which means that one gets an idea of great men, or great thinkers, but not any conception of great answers. Enduring questions become mere occasions for self-dramatization or "character development." One does *not* get a form of human life in response to which one may say, "this seems to be the best form of human life that human beings have come across thus far." Rather, one encounters a series of equally great men, without any extrinsic criterion to help decide whose better. Was John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Aquinas or Aristotle the greatest man? If their philosophy is reducible to a kind of personal poetry, then in fact, you may choose whatever you like without further argument. So, if Catholic Studies risks reducing Revelation to culture,

Great Books programs may risk reducing arguments about truth to a kind of dramatic poetry with authors rather than answers at the center.

TPP: Certainly there is some good in Great Books programs?

JW: What is good about that model, and what is defensible about it, is that if, within a university, or a college, or within society, one finds an entrenched refusal to ask questions about what a good human life looks like but one still has a sense that human life is somehow important, and one would like the importance of human life to be discussed—meaningfully . . . then Great Books curricula become a sort of consensus form of this education. We may not all believe in God, but we can all agree that Dante, Thomas Aquinas, and Dostoyevsky were all great writers—and that everybody should know that.

TPP: And how is the Humanities Department further distinguishable from a Great Books program?

JW: The Humanities Department, in contrast, sets forth the fundamental human questions as the organizing principle of our curriculum, rather than any particular author or set of material. It also holds open the possibility of a particular vision of what a good human character looks like. Indeed, as is the way of all universities, we have to provide accounts of what we're trying to provide our students for purposes of corporate-like assessment. One of the things that we agree upon, I suppose, to assess ourselves, is whether we have instilled a love of wisdom in our students. But, of course, the reason that we want to instill a love of wisdom in our students is because our department as a rule accepts the *telos* of human life that Thomas Aquinas gives us (and that Aristotle gives us, but not as richly and as completely as Thomas Aquinas does), which is that the end of human life is the contemplation of God—and it can be nothing less than this. That the life spent, therefore, in the contemplation of God, is the source of man's only true happiness; the happiness that exists for its own sake, rather than for something beyond itself.

That clear vision of what a good human life- a life well lived and happy - looks like, is something that we can hold up in a way that a Great

Books curriculum cannot. Most schools would not dare do what we do, but for some reason Villanova is not afraid, at least in a small department, to hold up this image of the good life for the human person.

TPP: But what would you say to the following objection: "Yes, yes, all that is very flowery and nice-sounding, perhaps fit for some, but what's the point of that type of education, what would I do with that? How would I get a job? Because, really, this is a financial investment here."

JW: The response to that, I suppose, has to be two-fold. On the one hand, that person is onto something. We are arguing that the human being, because he is a rational animal or an intellectual animal, is only fully happy when engaging the intellect in the contemplation of the highest truth. We are claiming that that is happiness in itself, and so, it is not a utilitarian or instrumental good. I would want to, in that respect, defend the purposive uselessness of that kind of study. But most of these arguments about "How I am going to get a job with that?", "What am I going to do with that?"—all of those arguments are actually grounded on just a deep seated ignorance of how the academy and how the modern economy work.

There are some few positions for which one really needs a specific mode of technical training, as opposed to education. You need a specific kind of training to be an auto mechanic, to become a nurse, to become an engineer. You do not need it to go into any form of business if you know mathematics, which you should if you want to be a well educated person; anything else, you can learn on the fly. I am reasonably sure that one of the secondary, though hardly the essential, goods of becoming capable of living the intellectual life or the speculative life, is that the mind does acquire a certain flexibility and capacity that it might not have otherwise, which is what people often say with that red herring of a word: the humanities, they say, develops "critical thinking." Or, to use a more obscene phrase, it teaches students to "learn how to learn." Neither of those phrases is acceptable, but both of them probably hits upon some sort of vague truth which I think was better expressed by T. S. Eliot when he was discussing Aristotle. He said, regarding Aristotle, "there is no method except to be extremely intelligent."

Much of modern society, beginning most obviously with Descartes, is structured around the idea or the attempt to replace intelligence with method or technique. We cannot all be brilliant; we cannot all contemplate the Good in a productive, meaningful way, but if someone can provide us with an instruction sheet—however complicated—then even a quasi-moron can learn to appraise the value of a house or do derivatives or whatever it is. That is what those who suffer from the banker's personality are interested in doing: if you are given the instruction sheet, all you have to do is not screw up the Calculus. When people say, "What are you going to do with that?", what they, of course, are testifying to is our very modern, very human, desire to try to reduce all of human life to a method. "If I can just do *X, Y, and Z*, everything will be ok." *X, Y, and Z* are almost invariably some kind of technique or program that someone else has thought up. And so, our usual conception of what it means to be successful is not to be intelligent, but rather to have been sufficiently clever that one can follow a certain set of instructions.

Modern thought on education seems to reduce it to the production of useful knowledge—that is, knowledge that increases our power over things—and the training of productive persons to follow technical instructions . . . which brings us finally to Cardinal Newman!

TPP: Yes, Newman; what of him and his idea of the university?

JW: When Newman gave his lectures on *The Idea of a University* in Dublin, in the 1850s, he was responding to a whole slew of problems that only the Nineteenth Century could have given us. The first one was the rise to prominence of utilitarianism, symbolized in Newman's imagination—and in fact, in reality—by the University of London, the first modern English university, the first university expressly committed to the cultivation of useful knowledge. It was to be a kind of hyper-advanced trade school, as have become most of our universities. In response to this utilitarianism Newman's *Idea of a University* tends to find its most immediately receptive audience, because against the reduction of the university to training in practical knowledge, Newman held up the idea of the university as the cultivation of broad learning

for the production, not of useful-anything, but of gentlemen—of someone with a well groomed, well trained and capacious intellect. I think Newman's defense of that aspect of the university did much to make the book so broadly appealing: the insistence that there is a circle of knowledge and within that circle of knowledge is a series of separate disciplines, each of which is its own end. When you pursue all of those disciplines, each for their own end, taken together, they actually produce an end beyond themselves, which is the production of a particular kind of person—a gentleman.

That remains, I suppose, in some respects, the most pressing argument that Newman set forth in his lectures. He was, of course, delivering these lectures right at the time that Ireland was about to get its first modern Catholic college or university. The Irish in the 1850s, having been very, very recently subject to potato blight were also very, very keen to try to enjoy the fruits of a modernized economy, and therefore, to create a population of bourgeois, middle-class people capable of being trained in professions rather than pursuing just a subsistence agriculture way of life. So Newman was responding to this desire "to get ahead" materially, on the part of the Irish, and the desire, on the part of English utilitarians, to reduce learning to the tools or methods or mechanisms that allow one to get ahead.

Within this—and here I think is where Newman shows up more profound, actually—within this culture, was also one that tried to deny the intellectual validity or reality of theology. The University of London, being utilitarian, thought that any speculative knowledge was completely superfluous—it was not knowledge as such. Knowledge is what gives an effect, or produces a result that one can control. If one cannot control God, theology cannot be knowledge; so they thought.

The rise to prominence of the physical sciences over the last four hundred years has not been driven chiefly by our capacity to know, and wonder at, the material universe. It has been driven largely by our *incapacity* to know, and wonder about, the universe, and by a consequent anxiety to get on with finding practical applications for these otherwise

mysterious things. Such did Francis Bacon, a couple centuries before Newman, exactly advise: any knowledge was superfluous that did not actually result in the increase of some kind of power. In Newman's day, it was really theology and philosophy that were under threat, and they were threatened not by man's evolved reason, but by his uninterest in reason and his appetite for technique, technology, and power.

Doubts about the reality of theology as knowledge, and the rise of that claim to public respectability, was significantly abetted by traditional English anti-Catholicism. By the 1830s, English Catholics had had their legal disabilities removed and were beginning to seek education. In the 1850s, there was the very real possibility of the British state getting involved in education in Ireland, providing a system of schools that would be similar to those that were coming into being in England. Of course, what the British State did not want, was to be giving money for the teaching of the Catholic faith. Very well, of course, to give money for the Church of England, because the Church of England was the established national church. But, quite rightly, the government understood that it would be strange for the same budget that was providing for the expansion of the Anglican faith also to provide for the proselytization or the catechization of members of a Church that was anathema to both the British State and the non-Catholic British population at large. So, they tried to find a way that they could create a double standard; the British State would allow—it was actually relatively flexible in this respect, as I understand it—the continued funding of religious education in its schools but that the Irish school system would not have any religious education at all.

So, the denial of theology as knowledge and the State's desire not to have certain kinds of "unofficial"—that is to say, Catholic—theology taught for political and, to put it cheaply, cultural reasons, occasioned Newman's defending theology as not only a "permissible" discipline but as the *necessary* discipline in higher education. This becomes Newman's central concern in the lectures. This proves Newman's first and, I think, most important argument in the book—to preserve theology's preeminent place within the circle of proper knowledge and of polite learning.

TPP: Was this the only menacing prospect that theology faced which Newman addressed?

JW: No, yet another threat to religious belief and to theology that Newman addresses in the book we may call the tendency to modern voluntarism or "emotivism": the tendency of modern persons to reduce everything that is not a fact subject to human control to mere subjective passion or desire. We like to say it inheres in the sentiments or the emotions, and so it is not part of reality as such—as if the human mind were not part of reality. In the second discourse, Newman defends theology as a discipline, as opposed to belonging to something that pertains merely to the sentiments. As if coming to understand the mystery of the Trinity were an exercise commensurable to learning to do a little bit of landscape painting with oils or learning to recite a poem by Tennyson.

Such was not the case, Newman argued. Not only is religion not simply reducible to the sentiments one feels, to religious feeling, but it is in fact *the* central discipline that gives order to all of the others. If this is his most important argument, it may be the one that he is least successful in setting forth. Because Newman was deeply influenced by the Romantic poets and by some mysterious cause also seems to have imbibed deeply Kant and German philosophy, Newman was more than inclined to suggest that the sentiments were a place of real meaning and importance, of consummate reality. Therefore, to call something subjective was hardly to denigrate it as beside-the-point or unreal relative to the objective achievements of science. Because Newman so privileged the subjective and because he was so influenced by intellectual frameworks that did so, he was not entirely capable of mounting the kind of critique that perhaps he needed to. And yet what a great rally he did make.

A more satisfying defense would take a long time; namely, by someone getting out from the reductive Anglophone utilitarian traditions, getting out from the influence of German idealism, and that "getting-out" was begun with the resurgence of the study of Saint Thomas Aquinas in the late-Nineteenth Century, the attempt to restore Metaphysics as a proper grounds of understanding and explaining the truth of things.

And then, in a curious, but nonetheless impressive way, the rise of these post-Humanist phenomena we've been discussing has also helped give rise to an idea of a post-secular reason. That is to say, the recognition by the beginning of the Twenty-First Century that all rational knowledge is preceded by, or is ultimately grounded in, the grace of God. When we speak of reality, we are talking about creation. That is to say that the fundamental characteristic or attribute of everything is not simply that it *is* but that it is and *did not have to be* and therefore is contingent—and therefore, it comes from something. It comes from a God Who made it and Who keeps it in being moment-by-moment.

The notion that charity precedes truth or is co-extensive with it, Benedict teaches in *Caritas in Veritate*; he says that charity precedes justice; that grace necessarily precedes nature because without grace there would be no nature. Thus, Nietzsche's nihilistic critique of modern rationalism, where he showed that it could not ground itself—it could not show itself to be completely rational all the way down—led him to say, reason is just a projection of mankind onto the world—it is an unreality. To talk about truth and falsehood is an unreality; it is just an expression of a reality called power or desire.

Nietzsche was right in some respects, but he was only partly right. In his book, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in the sixth section of the first chapter, he insults modern philosophers—Descartes, Kant, etc.—for all their pretensions of disinterested, self-demonstrating, highly mathematical, philosophical reasoning. He says in parenthesis, the mystics stand in contrast to these modern charlatans because they are "at once more honest and more silly," because they say that preceding everything they claim to know lies an inspiration or gift of faith. Such dismissive parentheses are like an aperture, a window, onto what everybody before Descartes seems to have known just fine: all human inquiry begins with, or rather is preceded by, all kinds of other things: preceded by wonder—Aristotle's philosophy begins in wonder. It is preceded in faith: we are constantly leaping into all modes of natural faith, as in, taking for granted that, when we think, something real is being

thought. But also, we receive supernatural faith, which is the ultimate kick in the shins to any claim to a sort of self-grounded, free-standing reason. Faith bequeaths what we most *need* to know and indeed provides the foundations of our knowledge, and so is not simply preceded by reason, but is preceded so radically that we have nothing that has not been given, have nothing that is not a gift; we have nothing that is truly ours, in the sense of created-by-us.

All this takes us back to where we began. What the Humanities Department does—and what I know Cardinal Newman certainly understood, though he did not develop the kind of philosophical vocabulary that I think adequately expresses it—reflects this conclusion: to know anything at all entails what John Paul II called a kind of "being-in-relation" or "being-with." The encounter of knowing ourselves only through seeing God or knowing God in faith—that experience is archetypal of human knowledge in general. It suggests not simply that I cannot have self-knowledge if I do not know God. In fact, there is some kind of theological knowledge, or theological encounter, that is presupposed in all kinds of knowing. As Jason Peters once said, sort-of paraphrasing G.K. Chesterton, "You cannot even say, 'Pass the mustard' without effectively invoking the divine Logos," the God that grounds all of these things. It is this concept of a post-secular reason that the Humanities Department is trying to manifest, engage, and promote. Newman stands out as the great figure representing an engagement with the weak but pervasive ideologies of the day as well as the genius who at once let this thought receive the lights of an age and stand above them. If the Humanities Department can match him in contemporary sensitivity and knowledge of the permanent, it will indeed change lives.

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