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John Henry Newman

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## CHAPTER I.

### MODES OF HOLDING AND APPREHENDING PROPOSITIONS.

#### § 1. MODES OF HOLDING PROPOSITIONS.

1. PROPOSITIONS (consisting of a subject and predicate united by the copula) may take a categorical, conditional, or interrogative form.

(1) An interrogative, when they ask a Question, (e. g. Does Free-trade benefit the poorer classes?) and imply that possibly it does, and possibly it does not.

(2) A conditional, when they express a Conclusion (e. g. Free-trade therefore benefits the poorer classes), and both imply, and imply their dependence on, other propositions.

(3) A categorical, when they simply make an Assertion (e. g. Free-trade does benefit), and imply the absence of any condition or reservation of any kind, looking neither before nor behind, as resting in themselves and being intrinsically complete.

These three modes of shaping a proposition, distinct as they are from each other, follow each other in natural sequence. A proposition, which starts with being a

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Question, may become a Conclusion, and then be changed into an Assertion; but it has of course ceased to be a question, so far forth as it has become a conclusion, and has rid itself of its argumentative form—that is, has ceased to be a conclusion,—so far forth as it has become an assertion. A question has not yet got so far as to be a conclusion, though it is the necessary preliminary of a conclusion; and an assertion has got beyond being a mere conclusion, though it is the natural issue of a conclusion. Their correlation is the measure of their distinction one from another.

No one is likely to deny that a question is distinct both from a conclusion and from an assertion; and an assertion will be found to be equally distinct from a conclusion. For, if we rest our affirmation on arguments, this shows that we are not asserting; and, when we assert, we do not argue. An assertion is as distinct from a conclusion, as a word of command is from a persuasion or recommendation. Command and assertion, as such, both of them, in their different ways, dispense with, discard, ignore antecedents of any kind, though antecedents may have been a *sine quâ non* condition of their being elicited. They both carry with them the pretension of being personal acts.

In insisting on the intrinsic distinctness of these three modes of putting a proposition, I am not maintaining that they may not co-exist as regards one and the same subject. For what we have already concluded, we may, if we will, make a question of; and what we are asserting, we may of course conclude over again. We may assert to one man, and conclude to another, and ask of

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a third ; still, when we assert, we do not conclude, and, when we assert or conclude, we do not question.

2. The internal act of holding propositions is for the most part analogous to the external act of enunciating them ; as there are three ways of enunciating, so are there three ways of holding them, each corresponding to each. These three mental acts are Doubt, Inference, and Assent. A question is the expression of a doubt ; a conclusion is the expression of an act of inference ; and an assertion is the expression of an act of assent. To doubt, for instance, is not to see one's way to hold that Free-trade is or is not a benefit ; to infer, is to hold on sufficient grounds that Free-trade may, must, or should be a benefit ; to assent to the proposition, is to hold that Free-trade is a benefit.

Moreover, propositions, while they are the material of these three enunciations, are the objects of the three corresponding mental acts ; and as without a proposition there cannot be a question, conclusion, or assertion, so without a proposition there is nothing to doubt about, nothing to infer, nothing to assent to. Mental acts of whatever kind presuppose their objects.

And, since the three enunciations are distinct from each other, therefore the three mental acts also, Doubt, Inference, and Assent, are, with reference to one and the same proposition, distinct from each other ; else, why should their several enunciations be distinct ? And indeed it is very evident, that, so far forth as we infer, we do not doubt, and that, when we assent, we are not inferring, and, when we doubt, we cannot assent.

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And in fact, these three modes of entertaining propositions,—doubting them, inferring them, assenting to them, are so distinct in their action, that, when they are severally carried out into the intellectual habits of an individual, they become the principles and notes of three distinct states or characters of mind. For instance, in the case of Revealed Religion, according as one or other of these is paramount within him, a man is a sceptic as regards it; or a philosopher, thinking it more or less probable considered as a conclusion of reason; or he has an unhesitating faith in it, and is recognized as a believer. If he simply disbelieves, or dissents, he is assenting to the contradictory of the thesis, viz. that there is no Revelation.

Many minds of course there are, which are not under the predominant influence of any one of the three. Thus men are to be found of irreflective, impulsive, unsettled, or again of acute minds, who do not know what they believe and what they do not, and who may be by turns sceptics, inquirers, or believers; who doubt, assent, infer, and doubt again, according to the circumstances of the season. Nay further, in all minds there is a certain co-existence of these distinct acts; that is, of two of them, for we can at once infer and assent, though we cannot at once either assent or infer and also doubt. Indeed, in a multitude of cases we infer truths, or apparent truths, before, and while, and after we assent to them.

Lastly, it cannot be denied that these three acts are all natural to the mind; I mean, that, in exercising them, we are not violating the laws of our nature, as

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if they were in themselves an extravagance or weakness, but are acting according to it, according to its legitimate constitution. Undoubtedly, it is possible, it is common, in the particular case, to err in the exercise of Doubt, of Inference, and of Assent; that is, we may be withholding a judgment about propositions on which we have the means of coming to some conclusion; or we may be assenting to propositions which we ought to receive only on the credit of their premisses, or again to keep ourselves in suspense about; but such errors of the individual belong to the individual, not to his nature, and cannot avail to forfeit for him his natural right, under proper circumstances, to doubt, or to infer, or to assent. We do but fulfil our nature in doubting, inferring, and assenting; and our duty is, not to abstain from the exercise of any function of our nature, but to do what is in itself right rightly.

3. So far in general:—in this Essay I treat of propositions only in their bearing upon concrete matter, and I am mainly concerned with Assent; with Inference, in its relation to Assent, and only such inference as is not demonstration; with Doubt hardly at all. I dismiss Doubt with one observation. I have here spoken of it simply as a suspense of mind, in which sense of the word, to have “no doubt” about a thesis is equivalent to one or other of the two remaining acts, either to inferring it or else assenting to it. However, the word is often taken to mean the deliberate recognition of a thesis as being uncertain; in this sense Doubt is nothing else than an assent, viz. an assent to a proposition inconsis-

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tent with the thesis, as I have already noticed in the case of Disbelief.

Confining myself to the subject of Assent and Inference, I observe two points of contrast between them, considered as modes of holding propositions.

The first I have already noted. Assent is unconditional; else, it is not really represented by assertion. Inference is conditional, because a conclusion at least implies the assumption of premisses, and still more, because in concrete matter, on which I am engaged, demonstration is impossible.

The second has regard to the apprehension necessary for holding a proposition. We cannot assent to a proposition, without some intelligent apprehension of it; whereas we need not understand it at all in order to infer it. We cannot give our assent to the proposition that "x is z," till we are told something about one or other of the terms; but we can infer, if "x is y, and y is z, that x is z," whether we know the meaning of x and z or no.

These points of contrast and their results will come before us in due course: here, for a time leaving the consideration of the modes of holding propositions, I proceed to inquire into what is to be understood by apprehending them.

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## § 2. MODES OF APPREHENDING PROPOSITIONS.

BY our apprehension of propositions I mean our imposition of a sense on the terms of which they are composed. Now what do the terms of a proposition, the subject and predicate, stand for? Sometimes they stand for certain ideas existing in our own minds, and not outside of them; sometimes for things simply external to us, brought home to us through the experiences and informations we have of them. All things in the exterior world are unit and individual, and are nothing else; but the mind not only contemplates those unit realities, as they exist, but has the gift, by an act of creation, to bring before it abstractions and generalizations, which have no existence, no counterpart, out of it.

Now there are propositions, in which one or both of the terms are common nouns, as standing for what is abstract, general, and non-existing, such as "Man is an animal, some men are learned, an Apostle is a creation of Christianity, a line is length without breadth, to err is human, to forgive divine." These I shall call notional propositions, and the apprehension with which we infer or assent to them, notional.

And there are other propositions, which are composed of singular nouns, and of which the terms stand for things

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external to us, unit and individual, as "Philip was the father of Alexander," "the earth goes round the sun," "the Apostles first preached to the Jews;" and these I shall call real propositions, and their apprehension real.

There are then two apprehensions or interpretations of propositions, notional and real.

Next I observe, that the same proposition may admit of both of these interpretations at once, having a notional sense as used by one man, and a real as used by another. Thus a schoolboy may perfectly apprehend, and construe with spirit, the poet's words, "Dum Capitolium scandet cum tacita Virgine Pontifex;" he has seen steep hills, flights of steps, and processions; he knows what enforced silence is; also he knows all about the Pontifex Maximus, and the Vestal Virgins; he has an abstract hold upon every word of the description, yet without the words therefore bringing before him at all the living image which they would light up in the mind of a contemporary of the poet, who had seen the fact described, or of a modern historian who had duly informed himself in the religious phenomena, and by meditation had realized the Roman ceremonial, of the age of Augustus. Again, "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori," is a mere commonplace, a terse expression of abstractions in the mind of the poet himself, if Philippi is to be the index of his patriotism, whereas it would be the record of experiences, a sovereign dogma, a grand aspiration, inflaming the imagination, piercing the heart, of a Wallace or a Tell.

As the multitude of common nouns have originally been singular, it is not surprising that many of them



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should so remain still in the apprehension of particular individuals. In the proposition "Sugar is sweet," the predicate is a common noun as used by those who have compared sugar in their thoughts with honey or glycerine; but it may be the only distinctively sweet thing in the experience of a child, and may be used by him as a noun singular. The first time that he tastes sugar, if his nurse says, "Sugar is sweet" in a notional sense, meaning by sugar, lump-sugar, powdered, brown, and candied, and by sweet, a specific flavour or scent which is found in many articles of food and many flowers, he may answer in a real sense, and in an individual proposition, "Sugar is sweet," meaning "this sugar is this sweet thing.

Thirdly, in the same mind and at the same time, the same proposition may express both what is notional and what is real. When a lecturer in mechanics or chemistry shows to his class by experiment some physical fact, he and his hearers at once enunciate it as an individual thing before their eyes, and also as generalized by their minds into a law of nature. When Virgil says, "Varium et mutabile semper femina," he both sets before his readers what he means to be a general truth, and at the same time applies it individually to the instance of Dido. He expresses at once a notion and a fact.

Of these two modes of apprehending propositions, notional and real, real is the stronger; I mean by stronger the more vivid and forcible. It is so to be accounted for the very reason that it is concerned with what is real or is taken for real; for intellectual ideas cannot compete

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in effectiveness with the experience of concrete facts. Various proverbs and maxims sanction me in so speaking, such as, "Facts are stubborn things," "Experientia docet," "Seeing is believing;" and the popular contrast between theory and practice, reason and sight, philosophy and faith. Not that real apprehension, as such, impels to action, any more than notional; but it excites and stimulates the affections and passions, by bringing facts home to them as motive causes. Thus it indirectly brings about what the apprehension of large principles, of general laws, or of moral obligations, never could effect.

Reverting to the two modes of holding propositions, conditional and unconditional, which was the subject of the former Section, that is, inferences and assents, I observe that inferences, which are conditional acts, are especially cognate to notional apprehension, and assents, which are unconditional, to real. This distinction, too, will come before us in the course of the following chapters.

And now I have stated the main subjects of which I propose to treat; viz. the distinctions in the use of propositions, which I have been drawing, and the questions which those distinctions involve.