Chapter 6. Assent considered as Unconditional

{157} I HAVE now said as much as need be said about the relation of Assent to Apprehension; and shall turn to the consideration of the relation existing between Assent and Inference.

As apprehension is a concomitant, so inference is ordinarily the antecedent of assent;—on this surely I need not enlarge;—but neither apprehension nor inference interferes with the unconditional character of the assent, viewed in itself. The circumstances of an act, however necessary to it, do not enter into the act; assent is in its nature absolute and unconditional, though it cannot be given except under certain conditions.

This is obvious; but what presents some difficulty is this, how it is that a conditional acceptance of a proposition,—such as is an act of inference,—is able to lead as it does, to an unconditional acceptance of it,—such as is assent; how it is that a proposition which is not, and cannot be, demonstrated, which at the highest can only be proved to be truth-like, not true, such as {158} "I shall die," nevertheless claims and receives our unqualified adhesion. To the consideration of this paradox, as it may be called, I shall now proceed; that is, to the consideration, first, of the act of assent to a proposition, which act is unconditional; next, of the act of inference, which goes before the assent and is conditional; and, thirdly, of the solution of the apparent inconsistency which is involved in holding that an unconditional acceptance of a proposition can be the result of its conditional verification. {159}

§ 1. Simple Assent

THE doctrine which I have been enunciating requires such careful explanation, that it is not wonderful that writers of great ability and name are to be found who have put it aside in favour of a doctrine of their own; but no doctrine on the subject is without its difficulties, and certainly not theirs, though it carries with it a show of common sense. The authors to whom I refer wish to maintain that there are degrees of assent, and that, as the reasons for a proposition are strong or weak, so is the assent. It follows from this that absolute assent has no legitimate exercise, except as ratifying acts of intuition or demonstration. What is thus brought home to us is indeed to be accepted unconditionally; but, as to reasonings in concrete matters, they are never more than probabilities, and the probability in each conclusion which we draw is the measure of our assent to that conclusion. Thus assent becomes a sort of necessary shadow, following upon inference, which is the substance; and is never without some alloy of doubt, because inference in the concrete never reaches more than probability.

Such is what may be called the *à priori* method of regarding assent in its relation to inference. It condemns {160} an unconditional assent in concrete matters on what may be called the nature of the case. Assent cannot rise higher than its source, inference in such matters is at best conditional, therefore assent is conditional also.

Abstract argument is always dangerous, and this instance is no exception to the rule; I prefer to go by facts. The theory to which I have referred cannot be carried out in practice. It may be rightly said to prove too much; for it debars us from unconditional assent in cases in which the common voice of mankind, the advocates of this theory included, would protest against the prohibition. There are many truths in concrete matter, which no one can demonstrate, yet every one unconditionally accepts; and though of course there are innumerable propositions to which it would be absurd to give an absolute assent, still the absurdity lies in the circumstances of each particular case, as it is taken by itself, not in their common violation of the pretentious axiom that probable reasoning can never lead to certitude.

Locke's remarks on the subject are an illustration of what I have been saying. This celebrated writer, after the manner of his school, speaks freely of degrees of assent, and considers that the strength of assent given to each proposition varies with the strength of the inference on which the assent follows; yet he is obliged to make exceptions to his general principle,—exceptions, unintelligible on his abstract doctrine, but demanded by the logic of facts. The practice of mankind is too strong for the antecedent theorem, to which he is desirous to subject it. {161}

First he says, in his chapter "On Probability," "Most of the propositions we think, reason, discourse, nay, act upon, are such as we cannot have undoubted knowledge of their truth; yet some of them *border so near* upon certainty, that we *make no doubt at all* about them, but *assent* to them *as firmly*, and act according to that assent as resolutely, *as if they were infallibly demonstrated*, and that our knowledge of them was perfect and certain." Here he allows that inferences, which are only "near upon certainty," are so near, that we legitimately accept them with "no doubt at all," and "assent to them as firmly as if they were infallibly demonstrated." That is, he affirms and sanctions the very paradox to which I am committed myself.

Again; he says, in his chapter on "The Degrees of Assent," that "when any particular thing, consonant to the constant observation of ourselves and others in the like case, comes attested by the concurrent reports of all that mention it, we receive it as easily, and build as firmly upon it, as if it were certain knowledge, and we reason and act thereupon, *with as little doubt as if it were perfect demonstration*." And he repeats, "These *probabilities* rise so near to certainty, that they *govern our thoughts as absolutely*, and influence all our actions as fully, as *the most evident demonstration*; and in what concerns us, we make little or no difference between them and certain knowledge. *Our belief thus grounded, rises to assurance*." Here again "probabilities" may be so strong as to "govern our thoughts as absolutely" as sheer demonstration, so {162} strong that belief, grounded on them, "rises to assurance," that is, to certitude.

I have so high a respect both for the character and the ability of Locke, for his manly simplicity of mind and his outspoken candour, and there is so much in his remarks upon reasoning and proof in which I fully concur, that I feel no pleasure in considering him in the light of an opponent to views, which I myself have ever cherished as true with an obstinate devotion; and I would willingly think that in the passage which follows in his

chapter on "Enthusiasm," he is aiming at superstitious extravagancies which I should repudiate myself as much as he can do; but, if so, his words go beyond the occasion, and contradict what I have quoted from him above.

"He that would seriously set upon the search of truth, ought, in the first place, to prepare his mind with a love of it. For he that loves it not will not take much pains to get it, nor be much concerned when he misses it. There is nobody, in the commonwealth of learning, who does not profess himself a lover of truth,—and there is not a rational creature, that would not take it amiss, to be thought otherwise of. And yet, for all this, one may truly say, there are very few lovers of truth, for truth-sake, even amongst those who persuade themselves that they are so. How a man may know, whether he be so, in earnest, is worth inquiry; and I think, there is this one unerring mark of it, viz. *the not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built on will warrant*. Whoever goes beyond this measure of {163} assent, it is plain, receives not truth in the love of it, loves not truth for truth-sake, but for some other by-end. For the evidence that any proposition is true (*except such as are self-evident*) lying only in the proofs a man has of it, whatsoever degrees of assent he affords it *beyond the degrees of that* evidence, it is plain *all that surplusage of assurance* is owing to some other affection, and not to the love of truth; it being as *impossible* that the love of truth should carry *my assent above the evidence* there is to me that it is true, as that the love of truth should make me assent to any proposition for the sake of that evidence which it has not that it is true; which is in effect to love it as a truth, because it is possible or probable that it may not be true." [Note 1]

Here he says that it is not only illogical, but immoral to "carry our *assent above* the *evidence* that a proposition is true," to have "a surplusage of *assurance beyond* the degrees of that evidence." And he excepts from this rule only self-evident propositions. How then is it not inconsistent with right reason, with the love of truth for its own sake, to allow, in his words quoted above, certain strong "probabilities" to "govern our thoughts as absolutely as the most evident demonstration"? how is there no "surplusage of assurance beyond the degrees of evidence" when in the case of those strong probabilities, we permit "our belief, thus grounded, to rise to assurance," as he pronounces we are rational in doing? Of course he {164} had in view one set of instances, when he implied that demonstration was the condition of absolute assent, and another set when he said that it was no such condition; but he surely cannot be acquitted of slovenly thinking in thus treating a cardinal subject. A philosopher should so anticipate the application, and guard the enunciation of his principles, as to secure them against the risk of their being made to change places with each other, to defend what he is eager to denounce, and to condemn what he finds it necessary to sanction. However, whatever is to be thought of his *à priori* method and his logical consistency, his *animus*, I fear, must be understood as hostile to the doctrine which I am going to maintain. He takes a view of the human mind, in relation to inference and assent, which to me seems theoretical and unreal. Reasonings and convictions which I deem natural and legitimate, he apparently would call irrational, enthusiastic, perverse, and immoral; and that, as I think, because he consults his own ideal of how the mind ought to act, instead of interrogating human nature, as an existing thing, as it is found in the world. Instead of

going by the testimony of psychological facts, and thereby determining our constitutive faculties and our proper condition, and being content with the mind as God has made it, he would form men as he thinks they ought to be formed, into something better and higher, and calls them irrational and indefensible, if (so to speak) they take to the water, instead of remaining under the narrow wings of his own arbitrary theory. {165}

1. Now the first question which this theory leads me to consider is, whether there is such an act of the mind as assent at all. If there is, it is plain it ought to show itself unequivocally as such, as distinct from other acts. For if a professed act can only be viewed as the necessary and immediate repetition of another act, if assent is a sort of reproduction and double of an act of inference, if when inference determines that a proposition is somewhat, or not a little, or a good deal, or very like truth, assent as its natural and normal counterpart says that it is somewhat, or not a little, or a good deal, or very like truth, then I do not see what we mean by saying, or why we say at all, that there is any such act. It is simply superfluous, in a psychological point of view, and a curiosity for subtle minds, and the sooner it is got out of the way the better. When I assent, I am supposed, it seems, to do precisely what I do when I infer, or rather not quite so much, but something which is included in inferring; for, while the disposition of my mind towards a given proposition is identical in assent and in inference, I merely drop the thought of the premisses when I assent, though not of their influence on the proposition inferred. This, then, and no more after all, is what nature prescribes; and this, and no more than this, is the conscientious use of our faculties, so to assent forsooth as to do nothing else than infer. Then, I say, if this be really the state of the case, if assent in no real way differs from inference, it is one and the same thing with it. It is another name for inference, and to speak of it at all does but mislead. Nor can it fairly be urged as a parallel case that an act of conscious {166} recognition, though distinct from an act of knowledge, is after all only its repetition. On the contrary, such a recognition is a reflex act with its own object, viz. the act of knowledge itself. As well might it be said that the hearing of the notes of my voice is a repetition of the act of singing:—it gives no plausibility then to the anomaly I am combating.

I lay it down, then, as a principle that either assent is intrinsically distinct from inference, or the sooner we get rid of the word in philosophy the better. If it be only the echo of an inference, do not treat it as a substantive act; but on the other hand, supposing it be not such an idle repetition, as I am sure it is not,—supposing the word "assent" does hold a rightful place in language and in thought,—if it does not admit of being confused with concluding and inferring,—if the two words are used for two operations of the intellect which cannot change their character,—if in matter of fact they are not always found together,—if they do not vary with each other,—if one is sometimes found without the other,—if one is strong when the other is weak,—if sometimes they seem even in conflict with each other,—then, since we know perfectly well what an inference is, it comes upon us to consider what, as distinct from inference, an assent is, and we are, by the very fact of its being distinct, advanced one step towards that account of it which I think is the true one. The first step then towards deciding the point, will be to inquire what the experience of human life, as it is daily brought before us, teaches us of the relation to each other of inference and assent. {167}

(1.) First, we know from experience that assents may endure without the presence of the inferential acts upon which they were originally elicited. It is plain, that, as life goes on, we are not only inwardly formed and changed by the accession of habits, but we are also enriched by a great multitude of beliefs and opinions, and that on a variety of subjects. These beliefs and opinions, held, as some of them are, almost as first principles, are assents, and they constitute, as it were, the clothing and furniture of the mind. I have already spoken of them under the head of "Credence" and "Opinion." Sometimes we are fully conscious of them; sometimes they are implicit, or only now and then come directly before our reflective faculty. Still they are assents; and, when we first admitted them, we had some kind of reason, slight or strong, recognized or not, for doing so. However, whatever those reasons were, even if we ever realized them, we have long forgotten them. Whether it was the authority of others, or our own observation, or our reading, or our reflections, which became the warrant of our assent, any how we received the matters in question into our minds as true, and gave them a place there. We assented to them, and we still assent, though we have forgotten what the warrant was. At present they are self-sustained in our minds, and have been so for long years; they are in no sense conclusions; they imply no process of thought. Here then is a case in which assent stands out as distinct from inference.

(2.) Again; sometimes assent fails, while the reasons for it and the inferential act which is the recognition of those reasons, are still present, and in force. Our reasons {168} may seem to us as strong as ever, yet they do not secure our assent. Our beliefs, founded on them, were and are not; we cannot perhaps tell when they went; we may have thought that we still held them, till something happened to call our attention to the state of our minds, and then we found that our assent had become an assertion. Sometimes, of course, a cause may be found why they went; there may have been some vague feeling that a fault lay at the ultimate basis, or in the underlying conditions, of our reasonings; or some misgiving that the subject-matter of them was beyond the reach of the human mind; or a consciousness that we had gained a broader view of things in general than when we first gave our assent; or that there were strong objections to our first convictions, which we had never taken into account. But this is not always so; sometimes our mind changes so quickly, so unaccountably, so disproportionately to any tangible arguments to which the change can be referred, and with such abiding recognition of the force of the old arguments, as to suggest the suspicion that moral causes, arising out of our condition, age, company, occupations, fortunes, are at the bottom. However, what once was assent is gone; yet the perception of the old arguments remains, showing that inference is one thing, and assent another.

(3.) And as assent sometimes dies out without tangible reasons, sufficient to account for its failure, so sometimes, in spite of strong and convincing arguments, it is never given. We sometimes find men loud in their admiration of truths which they never profess. As, by {169} the law of our mental constitution, obedience is quite distinct from faith, and men may believe without practising, so is assent also independent of our acts of inference. Again, prejudice hinders assent to the most incontrovertible proofs. Again, it not unfrequently happens, that while the keenness of the ratiocinative faculty enables a man to see the ultimate result of a complicated problem in a moment, it takes years for

him to embrace it as a truth, and to recognize it as an item in the circle of his knowledge. Yet he does at last so accept it, and then we say that he assents.

(4.) Again; very numerous are the cases, in which good arguments, and really good as far as they go, and confessed by us to be good, nevertheless are not strong enough to incline our minds ever so little to the conclusion at which they point. But why is it that we do not assent a little, in proportion to those arguments? On the contrary, we throw the full *onus probandi* on the side of the conclusion, and we refuse to assent to it at all, until we can assent to it altogether. The proof is capable of growth; but the assent either exists or does not exist.

(5.) I have already alluded to the influence of moral motives in hindering assent to conclusions which are logically unimpeachable. According to the couplet,—

"A man convinced against his will
Is of the same opinion still;"—

assent then is not the same as inference.

(6.) Strange as it may seem, this contrast between inference and assent is exemplified even in the province of mathematics. Argument is not always able to command {170} our Assent, even though it be demonstrative. Sometimes of course it forces its way, that is, when the steps of the reasoning are few, and admit of being viewed by the mind altogether. Certainly, one cannot conceive a man having before him the series of conditions and truths on which it depends that the three angles of a triangle are together equal to two right angles, and yet not assenting to that proposition. Were all propositions as plain, though assent would not in consequence be the same act as inference, yet it would certainly follow immediately upon it. I allow then as much as this, that, when an argument is in itself and by itself conclusive of a truth, it has by a law of our nature the same command over our assent, or rather the truth which it has reached has the same command, as our senses have. Certainly our intellectual nature is under laws, and the correlative of ascertained truth is unreserved assent.

But I am not speaking of short and lucid demonstrations; but of long and intricate mathematical investigations; and in that case, though every step may be indisputable, it still requires a specially sustained attention and an effort of memory to have in the mind all at once all the steps of the proof, with their bearings on each other, and the antecedents which they severally involve; and these conditions of the inference may interfere with the promptness of our assent.

Hence it is that party spirit or national feeling or religious prepossessions have before now had power to retard the reception of truths of a mathematical character; which never could have been, if demonstrations {171} were *ipso facto* assents. Nor indeed would any mathematician, even in questions of pure science, assent to his own conclusions, on new and difficult ground, and in the case of abstruse calculations, however often he went over his work, till he had the corroboration of other judgments

besides his own. He would have carefully revised his inference, and would assent to the probability of his accuracy in inferring, but still he would abstain from an immediate assent to the truth of his conclusion. Yet the corroboration of others cannot add to his perception of the proof; he would still perceive the proof, even though he failed in gaining their corroboration. And yet again he might arbitrarily make it his rule, never to assent to his conclusions without such corroboration, or at least before the lapse of a sufficient interval. Here again inference is distinct from assent.

I have been showing that inference and assent are distinct acts of the mind, and that they may be made apart from each other. Of course I cannot be taken to mean that there is no legitimate or actual connexion between them, as if arguments adverse to a conclusion did not naturally hinder assent; or as if the inclination to give assent were not greater or less according as the particular act of inference expressed a stronger or weaker probability; or as if assent did not always imply grounds in reason, implicit, if not explicit, or could be rightly given without sufficient grounds. So much is it commonly felt that assent must be preceded by inferential acts, that obstinate men give their own will as their very reason for assenting, if they can think of nothing better; "stat pro ratione voluntas." {172} Indeed, I doubt whether assent is ever given without some preliminary, which stands for a reason; but it does not follow from this, that it may not be withheld in cases when there are good reasons for giving it to a proposition, or may not be withdrawn after it has been given, the reasons remaining, or may not remain when the reasons are forgotten, or must always vary in strength, as the reasons vary; and this substantiveness, as I may call it, of the act of assent is the very point which I have wished to establish.

2. And in showing that assent is distinct from an act of inference, I have gone a good way towards showing in what it differs from it. If assent and inference are each of them the acceptance of a proposition, but the special characteristic of inference is that it is conditional, it is natural to suppose that assent is unconditional. Again, if assent is the acceptance of truth, and truth is the proper object of the intellect, and no one can hold conditionally what by the same act he holds to be true, here too is a reason for saying that assent is an adhesion without reserve or doubt to the proposition to which it is given. And again, it is to be presumed that the word has not two meanings: what it has at one time, it has at another. Inference is always inference; even if demonstrative, it is still conditional; it establishes an incontrovertible conclusion on the condition of incontrovertible premisses. To the conclusion thus drawn, assent gives its absolute recognition. In the case of all demonstrations, assent, when given, is unconditionally given. In one class of subjects, then, assent certainly is always unconditional; {173} but if the word stands for an undoubting and unhesitating act of the mind once, why does it not denote the same always? what evidence is there that it ever means anything else than that which the whole world will unite in witnessing that it means in certain cases? why are we not to interpret what is controverted by what is known? This is what is suggested on the first view of the question; but to continue:—

In demonstrative matters assent excludes the presence of doubt: now are instances producible, on the other hand, of its ever co-existing with doubt in cases of the

concrete? As the above instances have shown, on very many questions we do not give an assent at all. What commonly happens is this, that, after hearing and entering into what may be said for a proposition, we pronounce neither for nor against it. We may accept the conclusion as a conclusion, dependent on premisses, abstract, and tending to the concrete; but we do not follow up our inference of a proposition by giving an assent to it. That there are concrete propositions to which we give unconditional assents, I shall presently show; but I am now asking for instances of conditional, for instances in which we assent a little and not much. Usually, we do not assent at all. Every day, as it comes, brings with it opportunities for us to enlarge our circle of assents. We read the newspapers; we look through debates in Parliament, pleadings in the law courts, leading articles, letters of correspondents, reviews of books, criticisms in the fine arts, and we either form no opinion at all upon the subjects discussed, as lying out of our line, or at most {174} we have only an opinion about them. At the utmost we say that we are inclined to believe this proposition or that, that we are not sure it is not true, that much may be said for it, that we have been much struck by it; but we never say that we give it a degree of assent. We might as well talk of degrees of truth as of degrees of assent.

Yet Locke heads one of his chapters with the title "Degrees of Assent;" and a writer, of this century, who claims our respect from the tone and drift of his work, thus expresses himself after Locke's manner: "Moral evidence," he says, "may produce a variety of degrees of assents, from suspicion to moral certainty. For here, the degree of assent depends upon the degree in which the evidence on one side preponderates, or exceeds that on the other. And as this preponderancy may vary almost infinitely, so likewise may the degrees of assent. For a few of these degrees, though but for a few, names have been invented. Thus, when the evidence on one side preponderates a very little, there is ground for suspicion, or conjecture. Presumption, persuasion, belief, conclusion, conviction, moral certainty,—doubt, wavering, distrust, disbelief,—are words which imply an increase or decrease of this preponderancy. Some of these words also admit of epithets which denote a further increase or diminution of the assent." [Note 2]

Can there be a better illustration than this passage supplies of what I have been insisting on above, viz. that, in teaching various degrees of assent, we tend to destroy assent, as an act of the mind, altogether? This {175} author makes the degrees of assent "infinite," as the degrees of probability are infinite. His assents are really only inferences, and assent is a name without a meaning, the needless repetition of an inference. But in truth "suspicion, conjecture, presumption, persuasion, belief, conclusion, conviction, moral certainty," are not "assents" at all; they are simply more or less strong inferences of a proposition; and "doubt, wavering distrust, disbelief," are recognitions, more or less strong, of the probability of its contradictory.

There is only one sense in which we are allowed to call such acts or states of mind assents. They are opinions; and, as being such, they are, as I have already observed, when speaking of Opinion, assents to the plausibility, probability, doubtfulness, or untrustworthiness, of a proposition; that is, not variations of assent to an inference, but assents to a variation in inferences. When I assent to a doubtfulness, or to a probability,

my assent, as such, is as complete as if I assented to a truth; it is not a certain degree of assent. And, in like manner, I may be certain of an uncertainty; that does not destroy the specific notion convened in the word "certain."

I do not know then when it is that we ever deliberately profess assent to a proposition without meaning to convey to others the impression that we accept it unreservedly, and that because it is true. Certainly, we familiarly use such phrases as a half-assent, as we also speak of half-truths; but a half-assent is not a kind of assent any more than a half-truth is a kind of truth. As the object is indivisible, so is the act. A {176} half-truth is a proposition which in one aspect is a truth, and in another is not; to give a half-assent is to feel drawn towards assent, or to assent one moment and not the next, or to be in the way to assent to it. It means that the proposition in question deserves a hearing, that it is probable, or attractive, that it opens important views, that it is a key to perplexing difficulties, or the like.

3. Treating the subject then, not according to *à priori* fitness, but according to the facts of human nature, as they are found in the concrete action of life, I find numberless cases in which we do not assent at all, none in which assent is evidently conditional;—and many, as I shall now proceed to show, in which it is unconditional, and these in subject-matters which admit of nothing higher than probable reasoning. If human nature is to be its own witness, there is no medium between assenting and not assenting. Locke's theory of the duty of assenting more or less according to degrees of evidence, is invalidated by the testimony of high and low, young and old, ancient and modern, as continually given in their ordinary sayings and doings. Indeed, as I have shown, he does not strictly maintain it himself; yet, though he feels the claims of nature and fact to be too strong for him in certain cases, he gives no reason why he should violate his theory in these, and yet not in many more.

Now let us review some of those assents, which men give on evidence short of intuition and demonstration, yet which are as unconditional as if they had that highest evidence. {177}

First of all, starting from intuition, of course we all believe, without any doubt, that we exist; that we have an individuality and identity all our own; that we think, feel, and act, in the home of our own minds; that we have a present sense of good and evil, of a right and a wrong, of a true and a false, of a beautiful and a hideous, however we analyze our ideas of them. We have an absolute vision before us of what happened yesterday or last year, so as to be able without any chance of mistake to give evidence upon it in a court of justice, let the consequences be ever so serious. We are sure that of many things we are ignorant, that of many things we are in doubt, and that of many things we are not in doubt.

Nor is the assent which we give to facts limited to the range of self-consciousness. We are sure beyond all hazard of a mistake, that our own self is not the only being existing; that there is an external world; that it is a system with parts and a whole, a universe carried on by laws; and that the future is affected by the past. We accept and hold with

an unqualified assent, that the earth, considered as a phenomenon, is a globe; that all its regions see the sun by turns; that there are vast tracts on it of land and water; that there are really existing cities on definite sites, which go by the names of London, Paris, Florence, and Madrid. We are sure that Paris or London, unless suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake or burned to the ground, is today just what it was yesterday, when we left it.

We laugh to scorn the idea that we had no parents {178} though we have no memory of our birth; that we shall never depart this life, though we can have no experience of the future; that we are able to live without food, though we have never tried; that a world of men did not live before our time, or that that world has had no history; that there has been no rise and fall of states, no great men, no wars, no revolutions, no art, no science, no literature, no religion.

We should be either indignant or amused at the report of our intimate friend being false to us; and we are able sometimes, without any hesitation, to accuse certain parties of hostility and injustice to us. We may have a deep consciousness, which we never can lose, that we on our part have been cruel to others, and that they have felt us to be so, or that we have been, and have been felt to be, ungenerous to those who love us. We may have an overpowering sense of our moral weakness, of the precariousness of our life, health, wealth, position, and good fortune. We may have a clear view of the weak points of our physical constitution, of what food or medicine is good for us, and what does us harm. We may be able to master, at least in part, the course of our past history; its turning-points, our hits, and our great mistakes. We may have a sense of the presence of a Supreme Being, which never has been dimmed by even a passing shadow, which has inhabited us ever since we can recollect any thing, and which we cannot imagine our losing. We may be able, for others have been able, so to realize the precepts and truths of Christianity, as deliberately to surrender our life, rather than transgress the one or to deny the other. {179}

On all these truths we have an immediate and an unhesitating hold, nor do we think ourselves guilty of not loving truth for truth's sake, because we cannot reach them through a series of intuitive propositions. Assent on reasonings not demonstrative is too widely recognized an act to be irrational, unless man's nature is irrational, too familiar to the prudent and clear-minded to be an infirmity or an extravagance. None of us can think or act without the acceptance of truths, not intuitive, not demonstrated, yet sovereign. If our nature has any constitution, any laws, one of them is this absolute reception of propositions as true, which lie outside the narrow range of conclusions to which logic, formal or virtual, is tethered; nor has any philosophical theory the power to force on us a rule which will not work for a day.

When, then, philosophers lay down principles, on which it follows that our assent, except when given to objects of intuition or demonstration, is conditional, that the assent given to propositions by well-ordered minds necessarily varies with the proof producible for them, and that it does not and cannot remain one and the same while the proof is strengthened or weakened,—are they not to be considered as confusing together two

things very distinct from each other, a mental act or state and a scientific rule, an interior assent and a set of logical formulas? When they speak of degrees of assent, surely they have no intention at all of defining the position of the mind itself relative to the adoption of a given conclusion, but they are recording their perception of the relation {180} of that conclusion towards its premisses. They are contemplating how representative symbols work, not how the intellect is affected towards the thing which those symbols represent. In real truth they as little mean to assert the principle of measuring our assents by our logic, as they would fancy they could record the refreshment which we receive from the open air by the readings of the graduated scale of a thermometer. There is a connexion doubtless between a logical conclusion and an assent, as there is between the variation of the mercury and our sensations; but the mercury is not the cause of life and health, nor is verbal argumentation the principle of inward belief. If we feel hot or chilly, no one will convince us to the contrary by insisting that the glass is at 60º. It is the mind that reasons and assents, not a diagram on paper. I may have difficulty in the management of a proof, while I remain unshaken in my adherence to the conclusion. Supposing a boy cannot make his answer to some arithmetical or algebraical question tally with the book, need he at once distrust the book? Does his trust in it fall down a certain number of degrees, according to the force of his difficulty? On the contrary he keeps to the principle, implicit but present to his mind, with which he took up the book, that the book is more likely to be right than he is; and this mere preponderance of probability is sufficient to make him faithful to his belief in its correctness, till its incorrectness is actually proved.

My own opinion is, that the class of writers of {181} whom I have been speaking, have themselves as little misgiving about the truths which they pretend to weigh out and measure, as their unsophisticated neighbours; but they think it a duty to remind us, that since the full etiquette of logical requirements has not been satisfied, we must believe those truths at our peril. They warn us, that an issue which can never come to pass in matter of fact, is nevertheless in theory a possible supposition. They do not, for instance, intend for a moment to imply that there is even the shadow of a doubt that Great Britain is an island, but they think we ought to know, if we do not know, that there is no proof of the fact, in mode and figure, equal to the proof of a proposition of Euclid; and that in consequence they and we are all bound to suspend our judgment about such a fact, though it be in an infinitesimal degree, lest we should seem not to love truth for truth's sake. Having made their protest, they subside without scruple into that same absolute assurance of only partially-proved truths, which is natural to the illogical imagination of the multitude.

4. It remains to explain some conversational expressions, at first sight favourable to that doctrine of degrees in assent, which I have been combating.

(1.) We often speak of giving a modified and qualified, or a presumptive and *primâ facie* assent, or (as I have already said) a half-assent to opinions or facts; but these expressions admit of an easy explanation. Assent, upon the authority of others is often, as I have noticed, when speaking of notional assents, little more {182} than a profession or acquiescence or inference, not a real acceptance of a proposition. I report, for

instance, that there was a serious fire in the town in the past night; and then perhaps I add, that at least the morning papers say so;—that is, I have perhaps no positive doubt of the fact; still, by referring to the newspapers I imply that I do not take on myself the responsibility of the statement. In thus qualifying my apparent assent, I show that it was not a genuine assent at all. In like manner a *primâ facie* assent is an assent to an antecedent probability of a fact, not to the fact itself; as I might give a *primâ facie* assent to the Plurality of worlds or to the personality of Homer, without pledging myself to either absolutely. "Half-assent," of which I spoke above, is an inclination to assent, or again, an intention of assenting, when certain difficulties are surmounted. When we speak without thought, assent has as vague a meaning as half-assent; but when we deliberately say, "I assent," we signify an act of the mind so definite, as to admit of no change but that of its ceasing to be.

(2.) And so, too, though we sometimes use the phrase "conditional assent," yet we only mean thereby to say that we will assent under certain contingencies. Of course we may, if we please, include a condition in the proposition to which our assent is given; and then, that condition enters into the matter of the assent, but not into the assent itself. To assent to—"If this man is in a consumption, his days are numbered,"—is as little a conditional assent, as to assent to—"Of this consumptive patient the days are numbered,"—which, (though without the conditional form), is an equivalent {183} proposition. In such cases, strictly speaking, the assent is given neither to antecedent nor consequent of the conditional proposition, but to their connexion, that is, to the enthymematic *inferentia*. If we place the condition external to the proposition, then the assent will be given to "That 'his days are numbered' is conditionally true;" and of course we can assent to the conditionality of a proposition as well as to its probability. Or again, if so be, we may give our assent not only to the *inferentia* in a complex conditional proposition, but to each of the simple propositions, of which it is made up, besides. "There will be a storm soon, for the mercury falls;"—here, besides assenting to the connexion of the propositions, we may assent also to "The mercury falls," and to "There will be a storm." This is assenting to the premiss, *inferentia*, and thing inferred, all at once;—we assent to the whole syllogism, and to its component parts.

(3.) In like manner are to be explained the phrases, "deliberate assent," a "rational assent;" a "sudden," "impulsive," or "hesitating" assent. These expressions denote, not kinds or qualities, but the circumstances of assenting. A deliberate assent is an assent following upon deliberation. It is sometimes called a conviction, a word which commonly includes in its meaning two acts, both the act of inference, and the act of assent consequent upon the inference. This subject will be considered in the next Section. On the other hand, a hesitating assent is an assent to which we have been slow and intermittent in coming; or an assent which, when given, is thwarted and obscured {184} by external and flitting misgivings, though not such as to enter into the act itself, or essentially to damage it.

There is another sense in which we speak of a hesitating or uncertain assent; viz. when we assent in act, but not in the habit of our minds. Till assent to a doctrine or fact is my habit, I am at the mercy of inferences contrary to it; I assent today, and give up my

belief, or incline to disbelief, tomorrow. I may find it my duty, for instance, after the opportunity of careful inquiry and inference, to assent to another's innocence, whom I have for years considered guilty; but from long prejudice I may be unable to carry my new assent well about me, and may every now and then relapse into momentary thoughts injurious to him.

(4.) A more plausible objection to the absolute absence of all doubt or misgiving in an act of assent is found in the use of the terms firm and weak assent, or in the growth of belief and trust. Thus, we assent to the events of history, but not with that fulness and force of adherence to the received account of them with which we realize a record of occurrences which are within our own memory. And again, we assent to the praise bestowed on a friend's good qualities with an energy which we do not feel, when we are speaking of virtue in the abstract: and if we are political partisans, our assent is very cold, when we cannot refuse it, to representations made in favour of the wisdom or patriotism of statesmen whom we dislike. And then as to religious subjects we speak of "strong" faith and "feeble" faith; of the faith which would move mountains, and of the ordinary faith "without which it is impossible to please {185} God." And as we can grow in graces, so surely can we inclusively in faith. Again we rise from one work on Christian Evidences with our faith enlivened and invigorated; from another perhaps with the distracted father's words in our mouth, "I believe, help my unbelief."

Now it is evident, first of all, that habits of mind may grow, as being a something permanent and continuous; and by assent growing, it is often only meant that the habit grows and has greater hold upon the mind.

But again, when we carefully consider the matter, it will be found that this increase or decrease of strength does not lie in the assent itself, but in its circumstances and concomitants; for instance, in the emotions, in the ratiocinative faculty, or in the imagination.

For instance, as to the emotions, this strength of assent may be nothing more than the strength of love, hatred, interest, desire, or fear, which the object of the assent elicits, and this is especially the case when that object is of a religious nature. Such strength is adventitious and accidental; it may come, it may go; it is found in one man, not in another; it does not interfere with the genuineness and perfection of the act of assent. Balaam assented to the fact of his own intercourse with the supernatural, as well as Moses; but, to use religious language, he had light without love; his intellect was clear, his heart was cold. Hence his faith would popularly be considered wanting in strength. On the other hand, prejudice implies strong assents to the disadvantage of its object; that is, it encourages such assents, and guards them from the chance of being lost. {186}

Again, when a conclusion is recommended to us by the number and force of the arguments in proof of it, our recognition of them invests it with a luminousness, which in one sense adds strength to our assent to it, as it certainly does protect and embolden that assent. Thus we assent to a review of recent events, which we have studied from

original documents, with a triumphant peremptoriness which it neither occurs to us, nor is possible for us, to exercise, when we make an act of assent to the assassination of Julius Cæsar, or to the existence of the Abipones, though we are as securely certain of these latter facts as of the doings and occurrences of yesterday.

And further, all that I have said about the apprehension of propositions is in point here. We may speak of assent to our Lord's divinity as strong or feeble, according as it is given to the reality as impressed upon the imagination, or to the notion of it as entertained by the intellect.

(5.) Nor, lastly, does this doctrine of the intrinsic integrity and indivisibility (if I may so speak) of assent interfere with the teaching of Catholic theology as to the pre-eminence of strength in divine faith, which has a supernatural origin, when compared with all belief which is merely human and natural. For first, that pre-eminence consists, not in its differing from human faith, merely in degree of assent, but in its being superior in nature and kind [Note 3], so that the one does not {187} admit of a comparison with the other; and next, its intrinsic superiority is not a matter of experience, but is above experience [Note 4]. Assent is ever assent [Note 5]; but in the assent which follows on a divine announcement, and is vivified by a divine grace, there is, from the nature of the case, a transcendant adhesion of mind, intellectual and moral, and a special self-protection [Note 6], beyond the operation of those ordinary laws of thought, which alone have a place in my discussion.

Notes

1. Reference is made to Locke's statements in "Essay on Development of Doctrine," ch. vii. § 2.

2. Gambier on Moral Evidence, p. 6.

3. "Supernaturalis mentis assensus, rebus fidei exitibitus, cùm præcipuè dependeat à gratiâ Dei intrinsecus mentem illuminante et commovente, potest esse, et est, major quocunque assensu certitudini naturali præstito, seu ex motivis naturalibus orto," &c. Dmouski, Instit. t. i. p. 28.

4. Hoc [viz. multo certior est homo de eo quod audit à Deo qui falli non potest, quàm de eo quod videt propriâ ratione quâ falli potest] intelligendum est de certitudine fidei secundum appretiationem, non secundum intentionem; nam sæpe contingit, ut scientia clariùs percipiatur ab intellectu, atque ut connexio scientiæ cum veritate magis appareat, quàm connexio fidei cum eâdem; cognitiones enim naturales, utpote captui nostro accommodatæ, magis animum quietant, delectant, et veluti satiant."—Scavini, Theol. Moral. t. ii. p. 428.

5. "Suppono enim, veritatem fidei non esse certiorem veritate metaphysicâ aut geometricâ quoad modum assensionis, sed tantum quoad modum adhæsionis; quia utrinque intellectus absolutè sine modo limitante assentitur. Sola autem adhæsio

voluntatis diversa est; quia in actu fidei gratia seu habitus infusus roborat intellectum et voluntatem, ne tam facilè mutentur aut perturbentur."—Amort, Theol. t. i. p. 312.

"Hæc distinctio certitudinis [ex diversitate motivorum] extrinsecam tantum differentiam importat, cùm omnis naturalis certitudo, formaliter spectata, sit æqualis; debet enim essentialiter erroris periculum amovere, exclusio autem periculi erroris in indivisibili consistit; aut enim habetur aut non habetur."—Dmouski, ibid. p. 27.
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6. "Fides est certior omni veritate naturali, etiam geometricè aut metephysicè certâ; idque non solum certitudine adhæsionis sed etiam assentionis ... Intellectus sentit se in multis veritatibus etiam metaphysicè certis posse per objectiones perturbari, e.g. si legat scepticos ... E contrà circa ea, quæ constat esse revelata à Deo, nullus potest perturbari."—Amort, ibid. p. 367.