

Chapter 7. Certitude

§ 1. Assent and Certitude contrasted

{210} IN proceeding to compare together simple assent and complex, that is, Assent and Certitude, I begin by observing, that popularly no distinction is made between the two; or rather, that in religious teaching that is called Certitude to which I have given the name of Assent. I have no difficulty in adopting such a use of the words, though the course of my investigation has led me to another. Perhaps religious assent may be fitly called, to use a theological term, "material certitude;" and the first point of comparison which I shall make between the two states of mind, will serve to set me right with the common way of speaking.

1. It certainly follows then, from the distinctions which I have made, that great numbers of men must be considered to pass through life with neither doubt nor, on the other hand, certitude (as I have used the words) on the most important propositions which can occupy their minds, but with only a simple assent, that {211} is, an assent which they barely recognize, or bring home to their consciousness or reflect upon, as being assent. Such an assent is all that religious Protestants commonly have to show, who believe nevertheless with their whole hearts the contents of Holy Scripture. Such too is the state of mind of multitudes of good Catholics, perhaps the majority, who live and die in a simple, full, firm belief in all that the Church teaches, because she teaches it,—in the belief of the irreversible truth of whatever she defines and declares,—but who, as being far removed from Protestant and other dissentients, and having but little intellectual training, have never had the temptation to doubt, and never the opportunity to be certain. There were whole nations in the middle ages thus steeped in the Catholic Faith, who never used its doctrines as matter for argument or research, or changed the original belief of their childhood into the more scientific convictions of philosophy. As there is a condition of mind which is characterized by invincible ignorance, so there is another which may be said to be possessed of invincible knowledge; and it would be paradoxical in me to deny to such a mental state the highest quality of religious faith,—I mean certitude.

I allow this, and therefore I will call simple assent *material* certitude; or, to use a still more apposite term for it, *interpretative* certitude. I call it interpretative, signifying thereby that, though the assent in the individuals here contemplated is not a reflex act, still the question only has to be started about the truth of the objects of their assent, in order to elicit from them an {212} act of faith in response which will fulfil the conditions of certitude, as I have drawn them out. As to the argumentative process necessary for such an act, it is valid and sufficient, if it be carried out seriously, and proportionate to their several capacities:—"The Catholic Religion is true, because its objects, as present to my mind, control and influence my conduct as nothing else does;" or "because it has about it an odour of truth and sanctity *sui generis*, as perceptible to my moral nature as flowers to my sense, such as can only come from heaven;" or "because it has never been to me any thing but peace, joy, consolation, and strength, all through my troubled life." And if the particular argument used in some instances needs strengthening, then

let it be observed, that the keenness of the real apprehension with which the assent is made, though it cannot be the legitimate basis of the assent, may still legitimately act, and strongly act, in confirmation. Such, I say, would be the promptitude and effectiveness of the reasoning, and the facility of the change from assent to certitude proper, in the case of the multitudes in question, did the occasion for reflection occur; but it does not occur; and accordingly, most genuine and thorough as is the assent, it can only be called virtual, material, or interpretative certitude, if I have above explained certitude rightly.

Of course these remarks hold good in secular subjects as well as religious:—I believe, for instance, that I am living in an island, that Julius Cæsar once invaded it, that it has been conquered by successive races, that it has had great political and social changes, and that at {213} this time it has colonies, establishments, and imperial dominion all over the earth. All this I am accustomed to take for granted without a thought; but, were the need to arise, I should not find much difficulty in drawing out from my own mental resources reasons sufficient to justify me in these beliefs.

It is true indeed that, among the multitudes who are thus implicitly certain, there may be those who would change their assents, did they seek to place them upon an argumentative footing; for instance, some believers in Christianity, did they examine into its claims, might end in renouncing it. But this is only saying that there are genuine assents, and assents that ultimately become not genuine; and again, that there is an assent which is not a virtual certitude, and is lost in the attempt to make it certitude. And of course we are not gifted with that insight into the minds of individuals, which enables us to determine before the event, when it is that an assent is really such, and when not, or not a deeply rooted assent. Men may assent lightly, or from mere prejudice, or without understanding what it is to which they assent. They may be genuine believers in Revelation up to the time when they begin formally to examine,—nay, and really have implicit reasons for their belief,—and then, being overcome by the number of views which they have to confront, and swayed by the urgency of special objections, or biassed by their imaginations, or frightened by a deeper insight into the claims of religion upon the soul, may, in spite of their habitual and latent grounds for believing, shrink back and withdraw their assent. Or again, they may once {214} have believed, but their assent has gradually become a mere profession, without their knowing it; then, when by accident they interrogate themselves, they find no assent within them at all to turn into certitude. The event, I say, alone determines whether what is outwardly an assent is really such an act of the mind as admits of being developed into certitude, or is a mere self-delusion or a cloak for unbelief.

2. Next, I observe, that, of the two modes of apprehending propositions, notional and real, assent, as I have already said, has closer relations with real than with notional. Now a simple assent need not be notional; but the reflex or confirmatory assent of certitude always is given to a notional proposition, viz., to the truth, necessity, duty, &c., of our assent to the simple assent and to its proposition. Its predicate is a general term, and cannot stand for a fact, whereas the original proposition, included in it, may, and often does, express a fact. Thus, "The cholera is in the midst of us" is a real proposition;

but "That 'the cholera is in the midst of us' is beyond all doubt" is a notional. Now assent to a real proposition is assent to an imagination, and an imagination, as supplying objects to our emotional and moral nature, is adapted to be a principle of action: accordingly, the simple assent to "The cholera is among us," is more emphatic and operative, than the confirmatory assent, "It is beyond reasonable doubt that 'the cholera is among us.'" The confirmation gives momentum to the complex act of the mind, but the simple assent gives it its edge. The simple assent would still be operative in its measure, though the reflex assent {215} was, not "It is undeniable," but "It is probable" that "the cholera is among us;" whereas there would be no operative force in the mental act at all, though the reflex assent was to the truth, not to the probability of the fact, if the fact which was the object of the simple assent was nothing more than "The cholera is in China." The reflex assent then, which is the characteristic of certitude, does not immediately touch us; it is purely intellectual, and, taken by itself, has scarcely more force than the recording of a conclusion.

I have taken an instance, in which the matter which is submitted for examination and for assent, can hardly fail of being interesting to the minds employed upon it; but in many cases, even though the fact assented-to has a bearing upon action, it is not directly of a nature to influence the feelings or conduct, except of particular persons. And in such instances of certitude, the previous labour of coming to a conclusion, and that repose of mind which I have above described as attendant on an assent to its truth, often counteracts whatever of lively sensation the fact thus concluded is in itself adapted to excite; so that what is gained in depth and exactness of belief is lost as regards freshness and vigour. Hence it is that literary or scientific men, who may have investigated some difficult point of history, philosophy, or physics, and have come to their own settled conclusion about it, having had a perfect right to form one, are far more disposed to be silent as to their convictions, and to let others alone, than partisans on either side of the question, who take it {216} up with less thought and seriousness. And so again, in the religious world, no one seems to look for any great devotion or fervour in controversialists, writers on Christian Evidences, theologians, and the like, it being taken for granted, rightly or wrongly, that such men are too intellectual to be spiritual, and are more occupied with the truth of doctrine than with its reality. If, on the other hand, we would see what the force of simple assent can be, viewed apart from its reflex confirmation, we have but to look at the generous and uncalculating energy of faith as exemplified in the primitive Martyrs, in the youths who defied the pagan tyrant, or the maidens who were silent under his tortures. It is assent, pure and simple, which is the motive cause of great achievements; it is a confidence, growing out of instincts rather than arguments, stayed upon a vivid apprehension, and animated by a transcendent logic, more concentrated in will and in deed for the very reason that it has not been subjected to any intellectual development.

It must be borne in mind, that, in thus speaking, I am contrasting with each other the simple and the reflex assent, which together make up the complex act of certitude. In its complete exhibition keenness in believing is united with repose and persistence.

126 3. We must take the constitution of the human mind as we find it, and not as we may
127 judge it ought to be;—thus I am led on to another remark, which is at first sight
128 disadvantageous to Certitude. Introspection of our intellectual operations is not the best
129 of means for preserving us from intellectual hesitations. {217} To meddle with the
130 springs of thought and action is really to weaken them; and, as to that argumentation
131 which is the preliminary to Certitude, it may indeed be unavoidable, but, as in the case
132 of other serviceable allies, it is not so easy to discard it, after it has done its work, as it
133 was in the first instance to obtain its assistance. Questioning, when encouraged on any
134 subject-matter, readily becomes a habit, and leads the mind to substitute exercises of
135 inference for assent, whether simple or complex. Reasons for assenting suggest
136 reasons for not assenting, and what were realities to our imagination, while our assent
137 was simple, may become little more than notions, when we have attained to certitude.
138 Objections and difficulties tell upon the mind; it may lose its elasticity, and be unable to
139 throw them off. And thus, even as regards things which it may be absurd to doubt, we
140 may, in consequence of some past suggestion of the possibility of error, or of some
141 chance association to their disadvantage, be teased from time to time and hampered by
142 involuntary questionings, as if we were not certain, when we are. Nay, there are those,
143 who are visited with these even permanently, as a sort of *muscæ volitantes* of their
144 mental vision, ever flitting to and fro, and dimming its clearness and completeness—
145 visitants, for which they are not responsible, and which they know to be unreal, still so
146 seriously interfering with their comfort and even with their energy, that they may be
147 tempted to complain that even blind prejudice has more of quiet and of durability than
148 certitude.

149 As even Saints may suffer from imaginations in which {218} they have no part, so the
150 shreds and tatters of former controversies, and the litter of an argumentative habit, may
151 beset and obstruct the intellect,—questions which have been solved without their
152 solutions, chains of reasoning with missing links, difficulties which have their roots in the
153 nature of things, and which are necessarily left behind in a philosophical inquiry
154 because they cannot be removed, and which call for the exercise of good sense and for
155 strength of will to put them down with a high hand, as irrational or preposterous.
156 Whence comes evil? why are we created without our consent? how can the Supreme
157 Being have no beginning? how can He need skill, if He is omnipotent? if He is
158 omnipotent, why does He permit suffering? If He permits suffering, how is He all-loving?
159 if He is all-loving, how can He be just? if He is infinite, what has He to do with the finite?
160 how can the temporary be decisive of the eternal?—these, and a host of like questions,
161 must arise in every thoughtful mind, and, after the best use of reason, must be
162 deliberately put aside, as beyond reason, as (so to speak) no-thoroughfares, which,
163 having no outlet themselves, have no legitimate power to divert us from the King's
164 highway, and to hinder the direct course of religious inquiry from reaching its
165 destination. A serious obstruction, however, they will be now and then to particular
166 minds, enfeebling the faith which they cannot destroy,—being parallel to the
167 uncomfortable associations with which sometimes we regard one whom we have fallen-
168 in with, acquaintance or stranger, arising from some chance word, look, or action of his
169 which we have witnessed, and which prejudices him in our imagination, {219} though
170 we are angry with ourselves that it should do so.

171 Again, when, in confidence of our own certitude, and with a view to philosophical
172 fairness, we have attempted successfully to throw ourselves out of our habits of belief
173 into a simply dispassionate frame of mind, then vague antecedent improbabilities, or
174 what seem to us as such,—merely what is strange or marvellous in certain truths,
175 merely the fact that things happen in one way and not in another, when they must
176 happen in some way,—may disturb us, as suggesting to us, "Is it possible? who would
177 have thought it! what a coincidence!" without really touching the deep assent of our
178 whole intellectual being to the object, whatever it be, thus irrationally assailed. Thus we
179 may wonder at the Divine Mercy of the Incarnation, till we grow startled at it, and ask
180 why the earth has so special a theological history, or why we are Christians and others
181 not, or how God can really exert a particular governance, since He does not punish
182 such sinners as we are, thus seeming to doubt His power or His equity, though in truth
183 we are not doubting at all.

184 The occasion of this intellectual waywardness may be slighter still. I gaze on the
185 Palatine Hill, or on the Parthenon, or on the Pyramids, which I have read of from a boy,
186 or upon the matter-of-fact reality of the sacred places in the Holy Land, and I have to
187 force my imagination to follow the guidance of sight and of reason. It is to me so strange
188 that a lifelong belief should be changed into sight, and things should be so near me,
189 which hitherto had been visions. And so in times, first of suspense, then of joy; "When
190 the {220} Lord turned the captivity of Sion, then" (according to the Hebrew text) "we
191 were like unto them that dream." Yet it was a dream which they were certain was a
192 truth, while they seemed to doubt it. So, too, was it in some sense with the Apostles
193 after our Lord's resurrection.

194 Such vague thoughts, haunting or evanescent, are in no sense akin to that struggle
195 between faith and unbelief, which made the poor father cry out, "I believe, help Thou
196 mine unbelief!" Nay, even what in some minds seems like an undercurrent of
197 scepticism, or a faith founded on a perilous substratum of doubt, need not be more than
198 a temptation, though robbing Certitude of its normal peacefulness. In such a case, faith
199 may still express the steady conviction of the intellect; it may still be the grave, deep,
200 calm, prudent assurance of mature experience, though it is not the ready and impetuous
201 assent of the young, the generous, or the unreflecting.

202 4. There is another characteristic of Certitude, in contrast with Assent, which it is
203 important to insist upon, and that is, its persistence. Assents may and do change;
204 certitudes endure. This is why religion demands more than an assent to its truth; it
205 requires a certitude, or at least an assent which is convertible into certitude on demand.
206 Without certitude in religious faith there may be much decency of profession and of
207 observance, but there can be no habit of prayer, no directness of devotion, no
208 intercourse with the unseen, no generosity of self-sacrifice. Certitude then is essential to
209 the Christian; and if he is to persevere to the end, his certitude must include in it a
210 principle of persistence. This it has; as I shall explain in the next Section. {221}