

Dublin Review—Notices of Books

An Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent. By JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, D.D., of the Oratory.
London: Burns, Oates, & Co.

{535} IT will be admitted by all Father Newman's readers, that this is the hardest work he has ever written. Hitherto it has been his habit to diversify his treatment of a grave subject by rhetorical and descriptive episodes, which recreate and charm the reader and give him fresh spirit for abstract thought; but in the present work he seems so sensibly influenced by the gravity of the {536} task which he has undertaken, as to be incapable of digression. Then, again, he is proceeding for the most part on ground, which has hitherto been almost untrodden, and on which he does but profess to furnish "aids" towards the formation of "a grammar." And the consequence of all this is, that, notwithstanding the profusion of his exquisite illustrations, and notwithstanding his marvellous command of the English language—which he always indeed moulds to his purpose as though it had been invented for the very end of expressing his thoughts—the present Essay is very hard reading.

It must not however be understood that the doctrines of this volume are in any strict sense new. Take e.g. what will probably be admitted to be the central proposition of all; viz., that a vast quantity of most momentous truth is obtainable with certitude, by reasoning which is utterly incapable of logical analysis. This proposition has always been implicitly held by Catholic theologians and philosophers: for not only (as F. Newman points out) they universally assign the "judicium prudentum" as the sole means of determining many important verities; but, in treating of moral certainty, they all lay down that a converging series of probabilities may establish a truth quite conclusively and irrefragably. But then at this point they somewhat take us by surprise. For (1), having stated so very pregnant and pervasive a principle, they leave it without any methodical treatment; and do not attempt to give protection against the imminent danger of mistaking mere prejudice for legitimate conviction. And (2) they not unfrequently elsewhere imply—what it is difficult to reconcile with their language about moral certainty—that all conclusive reasoning can be exhibited in logical and syllogistic form.

We think then that F. Newman would have rendered very important service, had he done no more than drawn prominent attention to this noteworthy lacuna. But in fact he has treated the whole subject thus opened out, in a manner which impresses us as being at once strikingly original and at the same time in profound harmony with known truths and facts. No doubt, in

several particulars he has contented himself with opening a new vein of thought, without by any means attempting to exhaust it: he has suggested many a principle, which he has left to others to exhibit in its full issue. But this was simply inevitable in so original a work.

On the other hand there are one or two matters on which we cannot assent to F. Newman's view. For one instance of what we mean, we think that he very seriously underrates the importance of logical analysis, as compelling men into consistency with themselves and with acknowledged facts; and as an invaluable protection against prejudice and intellectual self-will.

In the case of a work so boiling over with thought, it is impossible to give the least notion of its contents within the limits of a notice. We hope however, we may have an article ready for our July number, in which we shall be able both duly to exhibit F. Newman's line of thought, and also to express our general appreciation of its characteristics and merits.

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