“Too Diffident to Define”: The Gentleman in Newman’s The Idea of a University

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In the fly-leaf of Newman’s personal copy of Nine Discourses Delivered to the Catholics of Dublin (which was later incorporated into The Idea of a University), there is a note in Newman’s handwriting, which reads:

The author has to apologize for the unsystematic character of this composition - but it is the necessary consequence or characteristic of the first approaches to a new subject. One is too diffident to define - too distrustful of the argument to profess to prove.¹

Newman did not always hold to this view, for he once disagreed with a reviewer who described The Idea of a University as unsystematic.² Yet in his celebrated portrait of the intellectual gentleman at the end of the Eighth Discourse (“Knowledge Viewed in Relation to Religion”), Newman shows himself “too diffident to define.” I shall argue that in this portrait Newman follows his own advice to the university preacher addressing himself to “some special danger” or “probable deficiency” or “need” of his hearers: that is, Newman addresses his reader “covertly,” not “showing on the surface of his discourse what he is aiming at.”³

As the title indicates, the Eighth Discourse examines the relation between intellectual culture and Christianity, and how intellectual culture can “assist,” “thwart,” and even “supplant” Christianity. Newman describes the Discourse as an attempt to “set down some portions of the outline” of the “Religion of Civilization” and “determine how they lie relatively to those principles, doctrines, and rules,” which “Heaven has given us in the Catholic Church” (Idea, p. 182). Elsewhere he describes the “very cardinal point” on which his discussion turns as “the radical difference” of “mental refinement from genuine religion, in spite of its seeming relationship” (Idea, p. 190).

The portrait of the gentleman takes up less than three pages in the Longmans edition. We see the gentleman in his relations with others and hear speculation about his religion. In his dealings with others he is unobtrusive, he “concurs” with their movements, he avoids “whatever may cause a jar or a jolt,” he refrains from slander and gossip, and he does not bear grudges. In the face of misfortune he is resigned. In controversy he is clear-headed, forcible, decisive, and fair to his opponents. As for religion, the gentleman may be an unbeliever; but if he is, he will nevertheless support religious toleration. If he is not a Christian, he may hold a religion, “in his own way.” It will be a religion of imagination and sentiment. Newman concludes by describing his portrait as “the lineaments of the ethical character,” which the “cultivated intellect will form, apart from the religious principle” (Idea, p. 211).

Scholars unanimously praise Newman’s style in this passage. But they disagree about Newman’s aim in the
portrait and about its relation to the work as a whole. In one passage, for example, Newman denies that his "academical system" is to eventuate in "any narrow or fantastic type, as for instance, that of an 'English gentleman'" ([Idea, p. x]). Elsewhere, however, he speaks of "a liberal knowledge, or a gentleman's knowledge" and writes, "I educate for it, and make it the scope of a University" ([Idea, p. 111]). Scholars debate about whether Newman’s "academical system" is supposed to eventuate in the gentleman described in the Eighth Discourse, and whether Newman makes this gentleman's knowledge “the scope of a University.” Does the gentleman illustrate the Religion of Philosophy, a pseudo-religion, so that “no man of truly imaginative vision” would allow himself “to be identified” with him, or is he Newman’s terrestrial ideal? Space does not permit a detailed examination of the arguments; but I would like to present some new evidence which bears on this controversy.

Consider the abrupt, enigmatic introduction of the portrait:

Hence it is that it is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain. This description is both refined and, as far as it goes, accurate ([Idea, p. 208]).

The first word - “Hence" - implies a logical connection with the preceding section; but that section contains no references to definition, pain, or a gentleman. Indeed, the discourse as a whole contains few references to these three topics - and those few references ([Idea, pp. 188, 193, 201] are not obviously related to the portrait of the gentleman. Newman need not of course prepare for the sketch obviously and explicitly; but his abruptness may well be intentional.

Another feature of the introduction calls for comment: Newman is “too diffident to define.” Before he has said a word about the gentleman, he qualifies his account in two ways. First, he offers not a definition, but a definition manque. Second, even by the less demanding standards of a description, his claim is true, “as far as it goes.” Why does he give “almost” a definition? Why does he give a description which is true, “as far as it goes”? And how far does his description go?

These questions are not easily answered. Newman elsewhere uses working definitions, ad hoc definitions, and virtual definitions. He elsewhere distinguishes between definitions and descriptions. He elsewhere describes a claim or view as true, “as far as it goes,” or true, “in a sense.”7 Perhaps Newman’s diffidence (reserve?) can be partially explained as “characteristic of the first approaches to a new subject” or a corollary of his frequently stated view that “words are incomplete exponents of ideas” and that “it were as easy to create what is real as to define it.”7

These explanations are true, as far as they go. But we must also remember that as Newman walked with Richard Whately in the meadow of Christ Church during the 1820s, he learned not only to “see” with his “own eyes” and “walk” with his “own feet,” but also to master Aristotelian logic.8 He undoubtedly discussed with Whately what were taken to be the Aristotelian criteria of a good definition.9

In view of this, it is striking that Newman departs from these Aristotelian standards. For example, the genus is not proximate. He uses a negative differentia; but a definition is supposed to explain what a thing is rather than what it is not. A good definition and the definiendum are convertible, that is, they can be validly exchanged; but Newman’s “definition” is not convertible. One should not confuse differentia and proprium or property. But not inflicting pain would be more a property of a gentleman, surely not that quality or difference that makes him be a gentleman in the first place.10

Our puzzlement grows if we look at other instances of views which Newman describes as true or good, “in a sense,” or “as far as it goes” ([Idea, pp. 66, 93-94, 189, 200, 451, 454, 516]). In most cases, Newman uses these expressions not when characterizing his own view, as he is here, but that of another. Moreover, Newman repeatedly insists that partial truths often omit the
Newman breaks the rules of Aristotelian definition - perfectly. He cannot or will not tell the whole truth about the gentleman. Perhaps we have in the portrait of the Eighth Discourse an example of what Wheelwright calls a “perspectival definition,” which “opens up new perspectives” and “throws light on a subject from a new angle.” “In many cases,” Wheelwright maintains:

> the point of a perspectival definition cannot be adequately understood without reading an entire paragraph, even the chapter or book in which it occurs.

We have already seen Newman’s “reserve” in his introduction to the portrait of the gentleman. Consider another manifestation of Newman’s reserve in the portrait’s allusiveness.

Arthur Dwight Culler argues that the “chief literary influence” upon Newman’s portrait of the gentleman is an eighteenth century work, James Forrester’s *The Polite Philosopher.* Culler exaggerates Forrester’s influence. Newman has, I believe, a more important model: the portrait of the *megalopsychos* or “great-souled man” in the fourth book of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics.*

> The influence of Aristotle’s Ethics in Tractarian Oxford can scarcely be exaggerated. In *Loss and Gain,* Newman’s fictional portrait of Oxford during the 1830s, Thruston coaches the *Ethics* and weighs “out his Aristotle by grains and pennyweights.”

We can even follow the successive steps in Newman’s study of the *Ethics,* because the Oratory at Birmingham preserves his heavily annotated Greek text of the work. Newman discussed the great-souled man in an essay for the Oriel Fellowship. Moreover, Frederick Oakeley, a Tractarian follower of Newman, published a volume in 1837, entitled, *Remarks upon Aristotelian and Plutonic Ethics as a Branch of the Studies Pursued in the Universi-

The frequency and the exactness of Newman’s references to magnanimity in *The Idea of a University* show that the subject was on his mind as he prepared his lectures for Dublin. The four explicit comparisons between magnanimity and other types of physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual perfection prepare us for the implicit...
comparison between Newman’s gentleman and Aristotle’s magnanimous man in the Eighth Discourse. Consider some of the similarities between the two portraits.

Both portraits begin with a definition - or *ad hoc* definition - and both describe a man primarily in his relations with others. We have already discussed Newman’s “definition” of the gentleman. Aristotle defines a man as magnanimous “if he thinks that he is worthy of great things,” provided that “he is worthy of them” (*Ethics*, p. 153).

Both portraits are about gentlemen. The great-souled man must have *kalokagathia*, which literally means “beauty and goodness.” The related form *kalokagathos*, as Newman was aware, means “gentleman.”

Both the magnanimous man and the gentleman are described not as receivers but as givers of benefits. The magnanimous man, writes Aristotle, “is disposed to confer benefits, but is ashamed to accept them” (*Ethics*, p. 156). Newman’s gentleman “makes light of favours while he does them,” and “he seems to be receiving when he is conferring” (*Idea*, p. 209).

Both the magnanimous man and the gentleman overlook injuries and wrongs. Aristotle’s model “does not nurse resentment,” because “it is beneath a magnanimous man to remember things against people, especially wrongs.” It is “more like him to overlook them” (*Ethics*, pp. 157-158). Newman’s gentleman “has too much good sense to be affronted at insults,” he is “too well employed to remember injuries, and too indolent to bear malice” (*Idea*, pp. 209-210).

Both men are candid about their likes and aversions. Aristotle’s great-souled man “is bound to be open in his likes and dislikes” and “to speak and act straightforwardly” (*Ethics*, p. 157). Newman’s gentleman “never insinuates evil which he dare not say out” (*Idea*, p. 209). Both the magnanimous man and the gentleman eschew gossip and self-revelation. The magnanimous man “does not care for personal conversation” and he “will talk neither about himself nor about anyone else” (*Ethics*, p. 158). Newman’s gentleman “is seldom prominent in conversation.” He “never speaks of himself except when compelled” and “has no ears for slander or gossip” (*Idea*, p. 209).

Both men are almost indolent. The magnanimous man holds back from action “except when a great honour or great work is at stake.” His actions, while great and notable, are “few.” Indeed, Aristotle calls him argon (1124 b 24-26; *Ethics*, p. 157), which means literally “inactive.” Newman’s gentleman concurs in the movements of others rather than taking the initiative himself (*Idea*, p. 209).

Finally, the magnanimous man and the gentleman act similarly in misfortune. Aristotle describes one of the two essential characteristics of , the magnanimous man as his “indifference to good and bad fortune” (*Ethics*, p. 155). Elsewhere he comments that great misfortunes may impair our happiness, but adds that even then nobility shines through:

when a man bears patiently a number of heavy disasters, not because he does not feel them but because he has a high and generous nature (*megalopsychos*) (*Ethics*, p. 84).

In like fashion, Newman’s intellectual gentleman:

is patient, forbearing, and resigned, on philosophical principles; he submits to pain, because it is inevitable, to bereavement, because it is irreparable, and to death, because it is his destiny (*Idea*, p. 210).

The similarity between these two moral portraits is too great to be accidental or unconscious. Newman has composed his sketch of the gentleman according to Aristotle’s pattern.

This is not to deny important differences between the two sketches. Aristotle’s description of the magnanimous man has undergone a transformation at Newman’s hands. He has lost what was perhaps his single most important characteristic - his autarchy or self-sufficiency. In doing so, he has gained either humility or its counterfeit, modesty (*Idea*, pp. 204-208). (Recall that the magnanimous man in Newman’s Oriel examination and Oakeley’s *Notes* was humble also.) He has also become more reserved.

The gentleman’s reserve deserves special emphasis. In Aristotle’s sketch, the magnanimous man is said to be “outspoken and candid, except for what he says in irony (*di eironeian*) to the general public” (*Ethics*, p. 157). Oakeley devotes the bulk of his treatment of the magnanimous man to this passage, which he paraphrases as follows:
Oakeley has translated Aristotle’s word *eironeia* “understatement” with that most characteristic Tractarian word, “reserve.” Oakeley’s preoccupation with this passage becomes more intelligible when we remember that he published his book in 1837, the same year Isaac Williams published his controversial tract, *On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge*. It is fitting, therefore, that Oakeley’s magnanimous man be a proto-Tractarian. Similarly the gentleman’s most conspicuous feature is not his self-sufficiency, but, paradoxically, his inconspicuousness. The portrait of the gentleman in the Eighth Discourse is one of several portraits from Newman’s pen in which reserve figures prominently. Newman not only sketches a portrait of a reserved figure, but he also presents the sketch with reserve. And Newman has more in common with his intellectual gentleman than reserve.

Both Newman and his intellectual gentleman practice a kind of hospitality. The benefits of the intellectual gentleman are, Newman writes, “like an easy chair or a good fire,” which “do their part in dispelling cold and fatigue” (*Idea*, p. 209). In a rectorial address Newman states that he desires “to stand on good terms with all kinds of knowledge,” to avoid “quarrelling with any,” and to “tender at least a recognition and hospitality” even “to those studies which are strangers to me” (*Idea*, p. 456). Newman also states that Philosophy and its “true representative” “keep in check the ambitious and encroaching” and “succour and maintain those which are succumbing under the more popular or the more fortunately circumstanced” (*Idea*, p. 458). Does the Rector of the Catholic University not echo his portrait of the gentleman, for the gentleman offers succour to “those which are succumbing” when he is “tender towards the bashful, gentle towards the distant,” and “merciful towards the absurd”? Thus far we have discussed the resemblances between Newman’s intellectual gentleman and Aristotle’s magnanimous man, on the one hand, and between the gentleman and Newman himself, on the other.

Who then is the gentleman? We cannot know. Newman scrupulously confines himself to surfaces and outward actions. But actions, Newman writes, “seldom carry the motives along with them” - and motives, he
adds, are crucial to the assessment of an action.\textsuperscript{28}

Little has been said thus far about the gentleman’s religion. In the portrait itself, Newman lists more than one possibility, while insisting that the “religion of Civilization” and “the profession of Catholicism” are compatible (\textit{Idea}, pp. 180, 211). We can guess about the range of possibilities from an examination of Newman’s other writings.

The gentleman may be a “holy man” like Francis de Sales or Basil (\textit{Idea}, p. 211). Or perhaps he will resemble the great-souled Patrick, who “did a work so great that he could not have a successor in it,” the “sanctity and learning and zeal and charity” which “followed on his death being but the result of the one impulse which he gave” (\textit{Idea}, p. 15).

The “true Christian” and the “true gentleman” are not only magnanimous, but also inconspicuous. The gentleman is “seldom prominent” (\textit{Idea}, p. 209). He looks “like virtue at a distance,” but is “detected by close observers, and on the long run” (\textit{Idea}, p. 121). In like fashion, the graces of the saint “lie deep, and are not known and understood until after his death, even if then.”\textsuperscript{29}

The gentleman may be a “lukewarm” Christian or a theological liberal with contracted views of Christianity.\textsuperscript{30} He may be an Abelard whose intellectual culture initially rescues him from a “fearful subjection to sense,” only to excuse such a subjection.\textsuperscript{31} Perhaps he is the sort of Christian who “never inflicts pain” — that is, who emphasizes the “brighter side of the Gospel — its tidings of comfort, its precepts of love” at the expense of “all darker, deeper views of man’s condition.”\textsuperscript{32} Perhaps he teaches the doctrine of “the unmixed satisfactory character of our prospects in the world to come.”\textsuperscript{33} Perhaps he will succumb to a “rebellious stirring” against “the severe and the terrible” (\textit{Idea}, pp. 217-218). Perhaps he will speak against “the Anathemas of the Athanasian Creed,” of “the Commination Service,” or of “certain of the Psalms.”\textsuperscript{34}

In short, the gentleman’s actions may reflect “Christian principle,” the “imitation of Christian principle,” or “some mere secular or selfish motive.”\textsuperscript{35} The decisive fact about the gentleman cannot be seen: namely, “the solemn conflict which is waging in the soul between what is divine and what is human.”\textsuperscript{36}

Why does Newman present the description as he does? Why does he describe it in advance as a partial or contracted notion? We now have a possible explanation. The obstacle is not so much the refractoriness of words as the difficulty of representing moral character “in itself,” in the “arbitrary medium” of language. To be sure, Newman writes, by “much effort” we can accomplish “a little”; but “in its combined dimensions” it is “as impossible to write and read a man (so to express it),” as “to give literal depth to a painted tablet.”\textsuperscript{37}

Newman paradoxically gives depth to this “painted tablet” by calling attention to its incompleteness, by alluding to Aristotle’s magnanimous man, and by pointing beyond his portrait to a living man who is a gentleman speaking in the living voice of a gentleman — himself. Finally, he gives the portrait depth by pointing beyond it to the portrait of two almost languid figures at the end of the Ninth Discourse.

The portrait of the gentleman and that of St. Philip Neri occur at analogous positions in the penultimate and final discourses. The portraits are similar in style. Culler points out that about one-third of the sentences which describe the gentleman are couched in negative form, and another third imply a negative by the nature of their verb.\textsuperscript{38} It is suggestive that Newman describes Neri in the same way. Thus, for example, Newman describes Neri as “but an humble priest,” a “stranger in Rome,” with “no distinction of family or letters,” “no claim of station or of office”; and yet “thus humble, thus unennobled, thus empty-handed,” he achieved “the glorious title of Apostle of Rome” (\textit{Idea}, p. 238).

Like the gentleman, Neri concurs with the movements of others rather than take the initiative himself. He “preferred to yield to the stream, and direct the current which he could not stop” (\textit{Idea}, p. 235). Newman even hints about Neri’s magnanimity: he was “great simply in the attraction with which a Divine Power had gifted him” (\textit{Idea}, p. 238).

This is not to suggest that the gentleman and the saint are the same. On the contrary, the two types may differ greatly. Indeed, as Ker has remarked, the tension between the gentleman and the saint, between “the genuinely unconditional insistence on the absolute value of knowledge in itself” and “the equally firm conviction that knowledge is emphatically not the highest good,” stands at the center of \textit{The Idea of a University}.\textsuperscript{39}
As Newman's description of the gentleman is true, as far as it goes, so the gentleman is good, as far as he goes. The calm of the gentleman is majestic because he “discerns the end in every beginning,” the “origin in every end,” the “law in every interruption,” and the “limit in each delay” (Idea, p. 138). He is majestic, but he may or may not be supernatural. The saint, on the other hand, is calm because he realizes:

the law of moral conflicts, and the incoherence of falsehood, and the issue of perplexities, and the end of all things, and the Presence of the Judge. ¹⁰

In the portrait of the gentleman Newman asserts that the accuracy and steadiness of the gentleman's logical powers may make him appear “to feel and to hold a whole circle of theological truths,” which “exist in his mind no otherwise than as a number of deductions” (Ideas, p. 211). But Newman elsewhere argues that a man cannot really set himself to master the doctrine of an intelligent Creator in its fullness “without going on a great deal farther than he at present dreams” (Idea, p. 69).

But as was indicated earlier, there are two almost languid figures at the end of the Ninth Discourse. We see Newman as a disciple of Philip Neri, concurring in his movements. He writes, “whether or not I can do anything at all in St. Philip's way,” at least “I can do nothing in any other” (Idea, p. 238).

Newman's languor elsewhere is that of the great-souled man holding back from action “except where the honour or the feat is a great one” (Ethics, p. 157). After delivering the first Discourse at Dublin Newman writes to his friend Ambrose St. John:

Don't suppose that I am fool enough to think I have done any great thing yet; it is only good as far as it goes. I trust it could not be better so far as it goes, but it goes a very little way. ⁴¹

Picture Newman sitting patiently beside his portmanteau, which is packed. He is waiting for a summons to Ireland. Why this apparent languor? Because he knows that a great work is at stake. The founding of a university, he writes, is “a great work, great in its conception, great in its promise,” and “great in the authority from which it proceeds” (Idea, p. 266). Moreover, it is a great work for which he knows himself to be suited. Newman displays the self-knowledge of a magnanimous man (cf. Ethics, p. 153) when he writes: “I can begin things.” ⁴²

**Notes**


5Newman elsewhere links intellectual cultivation with the avoidance of pain. See *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 8 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1910), vol. 1, p. 311, hereafter cited as PS. My colleague, Professor George Dameron, speculates that Newman's definition of the gentleman as “one who never inflicts pain” recalls his reference to “the unchristian practice of duelling” in the preceding section.


10For Aristotle’s discussion of definition see J. D. G. Evans, *Aristotle’s Concept of Dialectic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 104-135. I am indebted to my colleague, Rev. Richard VanderWeel, S.S.E., for assistance with Aristotelian logic and for reading an earlier draft of this essay.


15Culler does assert that the “incidental and unstudied greatness of mind” of Aristotle’s great-souled man “contributed very largely to Newman’s ideal of the philosopher”; but he fails to substantiate this claim and he erroneously distinguishes between Newman’s philosopher and gentleman; Culler *The Imperial Intellect*, p. 229. For Aristotle’s great-souled man see J. A. K. Thomson, Hugh Tredennick, and Jonathan Barnes, trans. and ed., *The Ethics of Aristotle* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1976), pp. 153-158. Hereafter *Ethics*. All references will be included in the text.


25By speaking in the living voice of a gentleman, Newman is applying Aristotle’s remarks about the persuasive force of ethos in the *Ethics*. See *Idea*, p. 408.


27Newman describes himself (*Idea*, p. 3) as “the cordial and deliberate maintainer and witness” of the doctrines he sets forth.


30Ibid., vol. 1, p. 314.


32PS, vol. 1, p. 311.

33Ibid., vol. 1, p. 320.

34Ibid., vol. 2, p. 283.


37OUS, p. 85.
38Culler, *The Imperial Intellect*, p. 239.
42*Letters and Diaries*, vol. 18, p. 492. See also *Letters and Diaries*, vol. 16, p. 535.