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## Connecting Morality and Spirituality

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## Dr. Gerard Magill

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# MORALITY AND SPIRITUALITY: A ROLE FOR THE IMAGINATION

Two of the most common words that we use when considering personal formation are morality and spirituality. Often we find ourselves remarking that someone has a clear moral compass or is a very spiritual person in recognition of the type of person they may be. These observations reflect the virtue or character of the individual in terms of who they are and how they can inspire others.

## Morality and Spirituality

Morality and spirituality are simple concepts that we use as routine indicators of personal growth. There is a dynamic interaction between them, but each has its distinctive purpose. On the one hand, morality can refer to matters of truth in moral life that shape character formation in relation to fellow human beings. On the other hand, spirituality can refer to matters of belief about the transcendent that influence the formation of holiness in relation to God.

How we grasp these moral truths or spiritual beliefs has absorbed the best minds throughout the history of Christianity, creating a treasure of wisdom to guide our daily lives. At the very core of this interaction lies an indispensable function of human perception that often goes unnoticed, yet lies at the very core of how we engage one another in morality and how we engage God in spirituality. What I refer to is the *perceptive imagination* that grasps complex reality in a meaningful manner to inspire concrete action, both regarding morality and spirituality.

## Imagination

It might appear that the imagination is essentially a function of music and the arts where it captivates us in so many different ways: the joy of dance, the beauty of paintings, the wonder of music, the fascination of the stage for ballet, opera and plays, the intrigue of brilliant prose, the mystery of poetry, the humor of the comedian, and so on. More fundamentally, the imagination enables us to perceive the possibility of God (the *imago Dei* that envelops biblical revelation) and to envision the demands of morality (that human beings must not be enslaved, that gender differentiation is crucial for fairness and equality, that the tapestry of sexual orientation results from nature created by a loving God).

While we can consider the imagination as a creative flair for seeing new possibilities beyond the horizon of our vision, that is

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just one of its characteristics – to be treasured of course by those who have the expertise for this sort of insight. Perhaps that is the trait that we associate with genius of all sorts. For the ordinary person the imagination is a routine capacity for expressing the perception that guides our daily activities. The imagination has its name insofar as it creates images in the mind – it is a mental capacity. It works with our reason and emotion to create images that enable us to grasp and express what we see and understand. The *imago Dei* in religious belief is an excellent illustration. We create an *image of God* that enables us to express our perception of the meaning of God. This is what is meant by imaginative perception – the imagination expresses rational perception in a particular manner. Also, images are typically so intense that they urge us to action. That is why the connection between perception and action is associated with the imagination – a connection that is crucial for morality and spirituality.

### **Example of Marriage**

I give a very common example of what the imagination is and how it functions: marriage. When a couple begins to date, then become close and fall in love, there comes a point when it becomes clear to them that they should marry. It is the imagination that facilitates that transition. Even before *the wedding at the altar* the couple cannot prove to themselves or others by deductive reasoning that they should marry one another. When deductive proof is not available, typically we refer to probabilities. But can you *imagine* what a future spouse would say at the altar if, when asked about loving the other, the reply is “probably” – just because we cannot prove our love by deductive inference! Our imagination rescues us from this doom. We can justifiably say that we love our spouse-to-be absolutely, with certitude, even though we cannot provide deductive, inferential, or logical proof. Our perceptive imagination enables us to reach beyond the limited scope of deductive reasoning.

When we marry, we commit our entire lives based on a proposition that cannot be proved (we love each other) – yet we can *imagine* that proposition and what it entails (spending the rest of our lives together). What exactly occurs here? The imagination is the mental capacity through reasonable and emotional perception that enables us, using images, to recognize that relevant data converge to a point of meaning, radically transforming a particular situation. When water heats there is a critical threshold that is crossed when it turns to steam. Similarly, the imagination enables us to cross a critical threshold by enabling us to interpret relevant data (time spent together and falling in love with one another) in a meaningful way that transforms the

situation. The imagination provides images that enable us to interpret complex data in a practical manner to reach a point of certitude that demands action – we can *envision* or *imagine* what it would be like to be married! The images that inspire this perceptive capacity of the imagination are so intense that they urge us to action. It is time to marry!

Though seemingly complicated, the imagination is a routine capacity that helps to guide us on a daily basis as we make decisions about morality and spirituality. If the imagination is sufficiently reliable to enable us to commit our entire lives to another in marriage (perception accompanied by action), it is just as reliable for routine endeavors that engage morality and spirituality. For example, when we pass homeless individuals on the street we can *imagine* their plight – and we give a donation, or take them for food or to a shelter in bad weather. Here the imagination inspires our moral action. When we do this, we can *imagine* that God welcomes and honors our action: by slipping into the lives of the homeless God slips into our lives. The imagination enables morality and spirituality to become integrally connected.

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Marriage flourishes when a couple is attentive to this role of the imagination that connects morality and spirituality. For example, the spouses may have grown up in different cultures or religions, with varied moral principles and spiritual tenets about God. However, their imagination can enable them to coalesce their differing experiences and beliefs (moral and spiritual) into a meaningful whole that enriches their commitment to morality and spirituality together, even if expressed in varying concepts and tenets. Their imagination will help them to discern whether, when, and how many children they might have, what type of education they will provide, and how they will raise their family together in a manner that honors and celebrates their moral and spiritual beliefs. When the imagination facilitates perception and inspires action in this way, it fosters morality and spirituality together. When couples share a similar culture or religion, the imagination enables them to engage their personal perspectives or expectations as they grow together in order to interpret their emerging experiences and challenges in a holistic manner. The imagination enables them to take action that reflects and shapes their moral and spiritual beliefs as a couple.

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### **Student Careers & Professional Life**

While marriage can be a good illustration of the role of the imagination that facilitates perception and inspires action, the imagination connects morality and spirituality in our lives in many other ways. For example, when students consider

a variety of career options, they rely upon the imagination to align their personal skills, traits, and interests with employment opportunities. When doing so they coalesce the data before them to see a point of convergence between themselves and their competencies and what a future opportunity might hold. Typically, the imagination enables them to gather the disparate data together to perceive a meaningful whole that brings them to the point of commitment. When this occurs their decisions can impact upon both morality and spirituality: the coalescence of the data reflects cohesion with their moral and spiritual beliefs. The call to teaching or healthcare might occur for some, reflecting a commitment to serve in the name of God; a commitment to science might occur for others, reflecting a drive to improve the environment or technology in the name of safeguarding God's creation; or others can assume leadership responsibilities in organizations or politics to enhance the stewardship of society in the name of God's invitation for human flourishing.

Furthermore, as students become professionals the imagination will enable them to foster their morality and spirituality as they encounter a myriad of dilemmas. Their professional lives will be ridden with complex scenarios filled with a plethora of data to be weighed and balanced regarding benefits and burdens: for teachers in the classroom where resources and education need to be calibrated properly for students; for clinicians in healthcare where treatment access, cost, and quality need to be balanced astutely for patients; for scientists in the laboratory and in the field where research risks and outcomes must be weighed judiciously for safety; and for leaders in organizations or politics where the interests of individuals and the common good must be regulated fairly. When professionals navigate these dilemmas the imagination helps them perceive the complex data in a meaningful way to inspire action that accords with their moral and spiritual beliefs. The interpretation of the data will reflect these beliefs and in turn the action that results from the perception of the imagination will further shape these moral and spiritual beliefs – that is what being a virtuous person means. In other words, the imagination fosters the integration of morality and spirituality in the personal formation of virtue.

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### **Social Responsibility Globally**

If marriage, student careers, and professional life can be illustrations of the imagination fostering morality and spirituality, there is an even more widespread example – the dilemmas that arise with regard to social responsibility globally. There are so many significant dilemmas that increasingly challenge the world. In this context, there is an urgent need for the imagination to

foster morality and spirituality in the process of seeking solutions to worldwide problems, from climate change and environmental destruction, to water pollution and shortage, to food sources and nutrition, etc.

*The contribution of the imagination to these worldwide problems involves two integrated steps: facilitating holistic perception and inspiring concrete action.*

The contribution of the imagination to these worldwide problems involves two integrated steps: *facilitating holistic perception* and *inspiring concrete action*. First, complex data have to be collated in a way that relates relevant specialties together (biological and environmental sciences, etc.) so that our imagination can facilitate a perception of the problem in a holistic manner to inspire concrete action. Second, by perceiving these problems holistically from a global perspective, concrete actions to bring about solutions must highlight the moral and spiritual values that undergird them. From the perspective of morality, strategic solutions to these earth-threatening problems must respect the fundamental principles of ethics that human life is precious, that vulnerable populations should be sheltered, and that social justice provides a moral compass for protecting everyone together. From the perspective of spirituality, humanity and the entire planet must be nurtured as the creation of God (*ruach*, breath of God) so that our stewardship will reflect God's love. How easy it is to regret that the Genesis story of Adam and Eve ended with ceding to the temptation of stealing the forbidden fruit and ruining their relation with God. Our challenge is to avoid the modern day temptation of stealing the planet and ruining its environment. It is our imagination that helps us to grasp the temptation of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of the Bible and its continuation in ecology today.

*...it is the imagination that enables us to perceive the Holy Spirit as guiding us to concrete solutions fostering our moral and spiritual values.*

Of course, it is no surprise to acknowledge that we all fall short of the ideal. That is the result of original sin as recounted in the book of Genesis. But the Easter story is that the Lord's redemption assures us of the presence of the Holy Spirit to foster our moral and spiritual values. It is the imagination that lets us understand that story in faith and hope. Also, it is our imagination that enables us to grasp the threat that we can bring to God's creation. And it is the imagination that enables us to perceive the Holy Spirit as guiding us to concrete solutions fostering our moral and spiritual values.

### **Theology of a Religious Imagination**

This contribution of the imagination to morality and spirituality expresses the approach to belief that was developed by Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801-1890). I have explored this contribution in a recent book that discusses Newman's theology of a religious imagination.<sup>1</sup> An explanation

of Newman's approach can be helpful to comprehend the perspective that he brought to this discussion. His life spanned the nineteenth century in Britain that encountered many tussles with morality and spirituality as the nation struggled with the industrial revolution and secularism.

Newman was an Anglican vicar who in mid-life converted to Catholicism in 1845 – at that time anti-Catholicism was rife and converting to it from the national religion of Anglicanism was an extraordinarily bold undertaking. Of course, that trauma is typically not the case today. It is fascinating that he did not change his basic approach to morality and spirituality from his days as an Anglican throughout his years as a Catholic. To celebrate his contribution to moral and spiritual values he was elevated to being a Cardinal in old age. Again, because of his holiness also his contributions to morality and spirituality, Pope Benedict XVI beatified him in 2010. The basic insight that carried Newman through his life was that truth matters in morality, holiness is crucial for spirituality, and our weakness in both requires the Holy Spirit's gentle guidance. He turned to the imagination to explain the relation between them. Let's have a closer look at this remarkable model.

*...he was especially interested in considering how the imagination inspires morality and spirituality in the lives of ordinary people.*

Romanticism was very much in vogue in nineteenth century Britain and it was characterized by emphasizing the imagination, such as in the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), John Keats (1875-1821), Percy Shelley (1792-1822), and William Wordsworth (1770-1850). Newman was astutely aware of and moved by the importance of the imagination among his peers. He was one of the most accomplished prose writers of his day, and an accomplished poet too as we recall when singing his poems as hymns in Church – “lead kindly light.”<sup>2</sup> However, he was especially interested in considering how the imagination inspires morality and spirituality in the lives of ordinary people. There is an abundance of sermons that explore this during his time as an Anglican and as a Catholic.<sup>3</sup>

In these sermons he became increasingly persuaded not only about the inter-connection between morality and spirituality but also about the need for the imagination for both to flourish. This was the core insight that led to his conversion to Catholicism in 1845 that he recounted in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*.<sup>4</sup> After his conversion, he founded a new Catholic University in Dublin where this insight contributed to his famous work on the *Idea of a University*.<sup>5</sup> A brief explanation of this core insight that was pivotal for his life and in his works helps to shed light on the role of the imagination for morality and spirituality.

## Doctrine and Moral Truth

Truth mattered to Newman. His approach to belief was anchored in the doctrinal truths of Christianity, first as an Anglican then as a Catholic. The great doctrines of the Church shaped his interest in the patristic period that led to his first published book, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*.<sup>6</sup> His conviction about the importance of doctrine extended from general religious beliefs about God and the Church (which led to his analysis of Christology and Ecclesiology) to beliefs regarding morality (which led to his analysis of conscience and prudence). In other words, doctrinal truth included moral truth.

Generally, he referred to truth in doctrine as dogma and he acknowledged his commitment to it from an early age: “From the age of fifteen, dogma has been the fundamental principle of my religion... What I held in 1816, I held in 1833, and I hold in 1864. Please God, I shall hold it to the end” (*Apologia*, 54). “The principle of *dogma*” he explained, refers to “supernatural truths irrevocably committed to human language, imperfect because it is human, but definitive and necessary because given from above” (*Development of Doctrine*, 325).<sup>7</sup>

It was his intense respect for doctrinal truth that contributed in part to his conversion to Catholicism. In a letter to his friend Henry Edward Manning in November 1844, a year before his conversion, he noted that his understanding of doctrine was causing him to increasingly see the Anglican Church as being in schism. He remarked that “our Church is in schism and that my salvation depends on my joining the Church of Rome” (*Letters and Diaries*, X, 412).<sup>8</sup> This respect for doctrinal truth hastened his conversion – he grew to believe that Catholic doctrine was more rooted in ancient Christianity than Anglican doctrine. In a remarkable passage, the imagination is especially evident in this struggle with doctrine:

I had seen the shadow of a hand upon a wall....  
He who had seen a ghost, cannot be as if he  
had never seen it. The heavens had opened and  
closed again. The thought for the moment had  
been, ‘The Church of Rome will be found right  
after all’ (*Apologia*, 111).

## Holiness and Conversion

Holiness also mattered to Newman. His approach to belief was anchored not only in the need for doctrine but also in the need for spirituality. As doctrine (religious and moral) was one of the reasons for his conversion, the other more urgent cause

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was spirituality. As indicated above, he sensed that “my salvation depends on my joining the Church of Rome” (*Letters and Diaries*, X, 412). For Newman, spirituality referred to holiness. Even before he started to struggle with doctrine as a young man at the age of 15, he had a profound experience of spiritual conversion to God. He later explained that “a great change of thought took place in me” as the cause of the “beginning of divine faith” that arose from his “inward conversion” (*Apologia*, 17). In 1864 he reflected in his *Apologia* on this life-changing experience of 1845. He emphasized the closeness he felt to God that he described as “making me rest in the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator” (*Apologia*, 18). Much later again, as an old man he described this experience as being “what is called religious conversion” (*Grammar*, 57). He wrote the *Grammar of Assent* in 1870 specifically to explain the foundations of belief that undergird conversion.<sup>9</sup>

*"My sole ascertainable reason for moving is a feeling of indefinite risk to my soul in staying ..."*

Just as his conviction about spirituality changed his life as a teenager, spirituality became the fulcrum for his conversion to Catholicism in 1845. When he was considering this conversion he deliberated over many years, resigning as an Anglican Vicar and leaving his parish in the town of Oxford to become a recluse in the countryside near Oxford. Over a period of several years, increasingly he recognized that his own salvation would be determined by his decision. In 1844, just a year prior to his conversion he explained his struggle about moving to Catholicism in a deeply personal way in a letter to his close friend John Keble: “My sole ascertainable reason for moving is a feeling of indefinite *risk* to my soul in staying ... I don't think I *could* die in our communion” (*Letters and Diaries*, X, 427).

By that time his sense of spirituality brought urgency to his deliberations about conversion. This was so profound that he began to fear his own death occurring before he had time to convert. In the January preceding his conversion in October 1845 he starkly presented his dismay in a letter to another close friend, Maria Rosina Giberne: “This I am sure of, that nothing but a simple, direct call of duty is a warrant for any one leaving our Church; ... The simple question is, Can *I* (it is personal, not whether another, but can *I*) be saved in the English Church? Am *I* in safety, were I to die tonight? Is it a mortal sin in *me*, not joining another communion?” (*Apologia*, 208). He also expressed this dramatic connection between conversion and salvation in a letter to his sister Jemima in March 1845, just six months before he converted: “I cannot at all make out *why* I should determine on moving except as thinking I should offend God by not doing so.... Suppose I were suddenly dying ... I think I should directly

send for a Priest.... Ought I to live where I could not bear to die?" (*Letters and Diaries*, vol. X, 595-596).

It is fascinating to note that as he recalled this inner turmoil he connected his sense of spirituality with the core function of morality, his conscience. He had made this integrative connection between morality and spirituality early in his life. When writing his Oxford University Sermons as an Anglican Vicar he had emphasized: "Conscience is the essential principle and sanction of religion in the mind. Conscience implies a relation between the soul and a something exterior, and that, moreover, superior to itself" (*University Sermons*, 18).<sup>10</sup> He identified this integrative relationship between spirituality and morality later in his *Apologia* – he described the spiritual urgency in terms of morality by referring to conscience to overcome whatever doubt he had remaining about his conversion: "My own convictions are as strong as I suppose they can become: only it is so difficult to know whether it is a call of *reason* or of conscience" (*Apologia*, 208).

### **Human Weakness and Patience**

Newman's deep devotion to religious and moral doctrine led him conceptually to Catholicism and his profound sense of spirituality increasingly made him aware of the urgent need for conversion. However, he also recognized that for morality and spirituality to function properly human weakness has to be considered. This recognition can be traced in his own conversion as he struggled over many years to discern his way forward. Early in his life he used the metaphor of light and darkness to depict the need for personal growth and development in morality and spirituality.

In the 1830s he was a leader in the renowned *Oxford Movement* that sought to bring the Anglican Church into modern times. A distinctive feature of the Oxford Movement was publishing a series of pamphlets called Tracts. In 1835 Newman adopted this metaphor of light and darkness. In Tract 73 "On the Introduction of Rationalistic Principles into Revealed Religion," he wrote: "Religious truth is neither light *nor* darkness, but both together: it is like the dim view of a country seen in the twilight, with forms half extracted from the darkness" (*Essays Critical and Historical*, vol. I: 41-42).<sup>11</sup> This metaphor expressed the core notion of development in his writing: that doctrines develop in their expression of truth and that we develop personally in morality and spirituality, and in each case there needs to be patience. He expressed this crucial insight in a long but renowned passage:

In the fullness of time both Judaism and Paganism had come to nought; the outward framework, which concealed yet suggested the Living Truth, had never been intended to last, ... The process of change had been slow; it had been done not rashly, but by rule and measure, ... first one disclosure and then another, till the whole evangelical doctrine was brought into full manifestation. And thus room was made for the anticipation of further and deeper disclosures, of truths still under the veil of the letter, and in their season to be revealed.... Mysteries are but the expressions in human language of truths to which the human mind is unequal (*Apologia*, 37).

His point was that we gain insight into religious truths over time. This developing perspective also pertains to morality and spirituality. It is fascinating to note that as he experienced his personal development that led to his conversion he was simultaneously writing his famous book on the *Development of Doctrine*.<sup>12</sup> In other words, he recounted his understanding of the development of religious truths over time at the same time as he experienced his own personal development in morality and spiritual beliefs that led to his conversion. It is no surprise that he made the following poignant remark about the development of doctrine that clearly reflected his own experience and aptly expresses the importance of ongoing development in morality and spirituality: "... to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often" (*Development of Doctrine*, 40).

*"... to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often"...*

At the core of this ongoing change that is indispensable for moral and spiritual beliefs is the role of the imagination. Its capacity to facilitate holistic perception and to inspire concrete action is crucial not only for personal formation but also for theology more generally. The personal growth in morality and spirituality that Newman experienced in his conversion process not only enlightened his understanding of doctrinal development but also shaped his theological method more generally. In his *Grammar of Assent*, written in old age in 1870 to explain the foundations of moral and spiritual beliefs, he emphasized that "the theology of a religious imagination ... has a living hold on truths" (*Grammar of Assent*, 117). His underlying concern was that theology should not meander in abstract truths. Rather, theology must be attentive to the concrete actions that characterizes morality and spirituality: "The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, ... Many a man will live and die upon a dogma: no man will be a martyr for a conclusion" (*Grammar of Assent*, 92-93). This reflected an insight earlier in his life that the moral and spiritual

*...Many a man will live and die upon a dogma: no man will be a martyr for a conclusion...*

values associated with personal virtue require concrete action and not merely abstract learning: “If virtue be a mastery over the mind, if its end be action, if its perfection be inward order, harmony, peace, we must seek it in graver and holier places than in libraries and reading-rooms” (*Discussions*, 268).<sup>13</sup>

*The imagination not only facilitates holistic perception of complex situations but also inspires concrete action.*

The life and works of Newman highlight the role of the imagination with regard to the integrative relation between morality and spirituality. The imagination not only facilitates holistic perception of complex situations but also inspires concrete action. Above all, the living hold on truths that characterizes his theology of a religious imagination includes the humbling recognition that to be perfect is to have changed often, requiring patience for personal development. That insight is exactly what Pope Francis expresses today with regard to the need for mercy: “without detracting from the evangelical ideal” he explains, we “need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 44). The significance of this spotlight upon mercy by Pope Francis will be continued in another essay.

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#### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Gerard Magill, *Religious Morality of John Henry Newman: Hermeneutics of the Imagination* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>John Henry Newman, “The Pillar of the Cloud,” *Verses on Various Occasions*, 1833 (London: Burns and Oates, 1883), 152.

<sup>3</sup>For example, his Anglican sermons include, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* as well as *Newman’s University Sermons: Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford 1826-43*; his Catholic sermons include, *Discourses to Mixed Congregations* and also *Sermons on Various Occasions*. For commentary, see, James Tolhurst, ed., *Sermon Notes of John Henry Newman, 1849-1878* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); John T. Ford, *John Henry Newman. Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2012).

<sup>4</sup>*Apologia pro Vita Sua*, by John Henry Newman, edited, introduction and notes by M. J. Svaglic. Oxford: Clarendon Press (1967).

<sup>5</sup>*The Idea of a University*, by John Henry Newman, edited and introduction by I. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

<sup>6</sup>*The Arians of the Fourth Century*, by John Henry Newman, introduction and notes by Rowan Williams (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup>*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, by John Henry Newman, forward by I. Ker (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

<sup>8</sup>*The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, Vols. I-XXXII (Oxford University Press).

<sup>9</sup>*An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, by John Henry Newman, edited, introduction, and notes by I. Ker. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

<sup>10</sup>*Newman's University Sermons: Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford 1826-43*, 3rd. ed. (1871), edited by D. M. McKinnon, and J. D. Holmes, introduction by C. S. Dessain (London: SPCK, 1970).

<sup>11</sup>John Henry Newman, *Essays Critical and Historical*, 2 vols.

<sup>12</sup>*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, by John Henry Newman, forward by I. Ker (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup>*Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects*, by John Henry Newman, J. Tolhurst and G. Tracey, eds. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).