



The Ilative Sense: Newman's Answer to Aristotelian Phronesis for a Complete Education of the Character and Conscience

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The purpose of this paper is to enrich the Aristotelian concept of *Phronesis* (Prudence) using the Newmanian Illative Sense, in order to have an adequate education of virtues and personal character. We must say that both concepts, *Phronesis* and the Illative Sense, come from different fields of study, such as Ethics and Metaphysics in the case of the Greek Philosopher, and Moral Theology and Philosophy of Mind in the case of the English Theologian. Probably what Newman tried to do with his Illative Sense is to correct the most pragmatic interpretation that can be made of Aristotelian Ethics: one which understands virtue as a mere mathematical calculation and its growth as a measure to reality. An empirical measurement of behavior that is applicable to the whole reality and, in a way, to every man in any circumstances. Since we are taking concepts from a science and bringing them to another science, it must be assumed that every generalization should be considered with the necessary caution. In any case, the goal of this piece of writing is to give valuable elements for future inquiries in the field of the education of character from an Aristotelian point of view.

For Aristotle the goal of Ethics is to reach the *eudaimonia*. The development of virtues in his thought tells us about a harmonious balance of elements that is alien to any form of radicalism: living well is living in an orderly manner. The virtue of Prudence is responsible for reaching this harmonious balance. However, the interpretation of that balance, in which human beings must think and act, can limit the possibility of an unrestricted development of people, which for Newman is related to an unconditional love for Good and Beauty, and a passionate search for Truth in the material things that surround human life. Therefore, an instrument such as the Illative Sense —responsible for seeking Truth and articulating all the elements among themselves and obtaining the certitude— is required. Illative Sense serves to ascertain whether a virtue is an authentic virtue —such as excellence in the achievement of Good— or, on the contrary, it is a balance between elements to achieve a quiet life. As Kristjánsson underlines, "Aristotle's indirect-blue print view suggests in my estimation that —given the current state of play in Western educational systems— a special taught subject is needed to integrate efforts at moral education: a subject where students learn in a systematic fashion about the essential features of human flourishing and how they fit together in a well-rounded life." (2014, p.166).

From a Newmanian point of view, a problem that is associated with the notion of Prudence in Aristotle is the limitation of virtuous acts to the achievement of human happiness and its lack of transcendental vision. Since the Good perceived in the virtuous action has a mysterious and indecipherable character for the human mind, the Illative Sense gives Prudence a superior perspective. Unconsciously it is not only the middle point that the person is looking for, it is something much more radical. It certainly takes into account the achievement of *eudaimonia*, but does not submit to it, which is why, for instance, the

person is capable of embracing strong suffering in some decisions, which, from a pure Aristotelian prudential point of view, would not be comprehensible at all.

We have to add that the development of virtues does not imply the development of personal and technical skills to deal with practical life, but mainly to build constitutive essential elements of the human being. Thus, Newman's Illative Sense may have an important function in the education of character, in what Aristotle called the "salvation of the principle" (1151^a), that helps to avoid a poor perspective during the process of the development of virtues. The Illative Sense not only acts at the end of the process, achieving *telos*, but also transforming the person into a lover of the right means. The actions for increasing a virtue are not only acts of an achieved equilibrium but are acts of an authentic inner growth of the person. In other words, if the person develops virtues, she does not only know how to do things correctly, but rather she becomes better in the process. With a virtue the Good starts in some way a dynamic part of human life from the beginning. The goal of the habit can be the achievement of an instrumental skill, by means of repetitions, but a virtue is a habit that helps to live the whole life in a certain way.

Both, Aristotle and Newman, think that Truth can be known by the Human Being. Aristotle describes knowledge in his *Metaphysics* as the action of the Agent Intellect, which acts in order to adjust the soul to reality. That is normally due to the use of logic, through conscious actions, but it can also be elicited in a poetical way. In one way or another, for Aristotle, knowledge always implies rational actions. For the Greek Philosopher this intellectual incorporation in the human mind is carried out by developing the virtue of Prudence, which is the heart and measure of Ethics. Nonetheless, for Newman that adequacy is not as logical and accurate as the one defended by Aristotle. As Zeno underlines, for Newman, "to know is an act of life, in other words knowing is closely connected with life so that it necessarily is affected by factors which have their roots in life, as affections habits, etc. Especially when knowledge has as its object the real and the concrete, which have as it were grown into life, this object is not only apprehended by the intellect, but by the feelings and the affections because every human faculty is in one way or other related to the real and the concrete we fall in with. These relations do not interfere at all with the objectivity of our knowledge" (1951, p. 55).

There are other differences between both concepts, Prudence and Illative Sense, in practical Ethics. The virtue of Prudence for Aristotle is a rational and constant disposition, whereas for Newman the *Illative Sense* is not. While in Aristotle Prudence refers to all aspects of human life, for Newman, the action of Illative Sense is understood as acting only according to circumstantial moments. Unlike Aristotle (1140th), Newman does not speak of a permanent and full disposition, but of a concrete action applied to each singular moment, which is specified in an action of judgment about a certain truth. "It is with this drift that I observe that the rule of conduct for one man is not always the rule for another, though the rule is always one and the same in the abstract, and in its principle and scope" (Newman, 1903, p. 356).

Newman does not believe in the development of the mind just from a logical perspective, but through deep processes called Notional Assents and mainly through Real Assents, where the mind links latent and immeasurable relationships between realities. Through this itinerary the human mind is guided by the Illative Sense. This sense is a universal organ of recognition of the Truth, which grows and is

perfected by reflection as well as by experience. It is an innate light in every person, a “personal gift” (Zeno, 1952, p. 269) for solving personal circumstances. Also, it is common for every culture and it is universal in every human nature: “This power of judging and concluding, when in its perfection, I call the Illative Sense, and I shall best illustrate it by referring to parallel faculties, which we commonly recognize without difficulty” (Newman, 1903, p. 353). Therefore, “[t]he whole man is moved by the concrete object just because it is concrete. Theory does not drive to action. The mere essence of a thing is no object for the faculty of volition; this faculty wants the object itself, as it is, both with its essence and its individualizing circumstances. To have a good idea of the desirability of a thing we should know the thing in as many aspects and relations as possible, and this is real apprehension and real assent” (Zeno, 1951, p. 65).

In addition, for Aristotle, Prudence is a quality amongst the citizens, which only exists in those born at the *Polis*. His concept of virtuous excellence has been seen many times from a controversial, elitist point of view. Nonetheless, the Newmanian Illative sense is universal and innate in every human being of every culture, and it can be increase through education

According to Aristotle, the development of the *Phronesis* has to do mainly with the experience and can be developed with time, as Kristjánsson declares: "Here is a mystery. Whereas most Aristotelian approaches to moral education highlight the early habituation phase of development, they rarely have much to say about the ultimate goal of cultivating fully fledged *Phronesis*" (2014, p. 152). Thus, following the ideas of Newman, it is useless to have many experiences but not to grow in personal love for Truth, which is located in the depths of personal conscience. Also, when someone loves Truth, she can also learn with other experiences. Therefore, the development of the Illative Sense does not come from a rational reflection, or the development of a strong intellectual life, not from the decision made or the development of personal will, but from the love that person possesses, which can grow in her internal life. In this way, the Illative Sense can be seen not only as a perfection that is realized by *Phronesis*, but also as linked to wisdom, *Sophia*. Aristotle as well as Newman consider contemplation as the highest form of knowledge and as the most exalted activity that every human being can perform. Contemplation in Newman would not be a pure approach to the truth of things but to the relationship that exists between Truth, Good, and Beauty, which is materialized in a wisdom that is embodied in a type of action.

As we have commented, Newman considers that there is not a full growth of Prudence but a growth which is always partial and circumstantial, related to every moment lived by the person: “It supplies no common measure between mind and mind, as being nothing else than a personal gift or acquisition. Few there are, as I said above, who are good reasoners on all subject-matters” (Newman, 1903, p. 362). Aristotelian Prudence is related to rational life and discursive logic; nevertheless, the Illative sense has a wide margin for intuition and preconscious life, although it can be conscious and turn into logical reasoning as well. Newman's correction of Aristotle may also be directed towards the proposal of syllogistic and rationalistic ethical education, which always aims at the *medium virtutum*, the right balance, sometimes forgetting the radicalism of right elections.

Finally, the virtue of Prudence in Aristotle has not a proper object. Following the Greek Philosopher we can say that its object is other virtues. Therefore, Prudence growth cannot be seen in itself but,

indirectly, in the performance of virtuous acts, ordering and measuring the individual's behavior in each situation. Newman's Illative Sense does not have a proper object either; on the contrary, the purpose of Illative sense, —related to human conscience— is to unify within the person a series of unstructured aspects of knowledge that we accumulate about things. It is, therefore, a useful instrument for searching and unifying reality, establishing a relationship between personal experiences and the internal world of the person.

Conclusion

The *Illative Sense* is an interesting correction of the concept of *Phronesis*, taking elements of a universal personal Conscience. In this way, virtue is the right decision between two vices, and it is also a radical and very personal option for the Truth. The education in the love of Truth is not explicitly stated in the Ethics nor in the Aristotelian *paideia* but is taken for granted in the actions of virtuous men. With the action of the Illative Sense, prudent decisions are not only balanced, but also personal and intimate. It is not a calculation but a real extreme of excellence, and entails, above all, the most adequate response to the demands for one's own freedom.

In an Newmanina Aristotle's interpretations, the formation and development of a person's character is given by the growth of stable dispositions, good habits, which, in order to have a virtuous sense, must direct the person toward Good, Truth and Beauty. Therefore, it is not just habits of behavior or routines, but a way of life and the reversal of the action to the world of one's own Conscience. Otherwise, understanding Aristotelian virtue in the wrong way can mistake virtues for the existence of good customs, which do not alter a balanced life, developing a kind of stoicism, a pragmatic life with not strong problems but without deep meaning, a life with a lack of a real personal implication. To this respect, Newman comments: "Such is Aristotle's doctrine, and it is undoubtedly true. An ethical system may supply laws, general rules, guiding principles, a number of examples, suggestions, landmarks, limitations, cautions, distinctions, solutions of critical or anxious difficulties; but who is to apply them to a particular case?" (1903, p. 354).

The development of Newman's Illative Sense serves to relate the virtue of Prudence to contemplation. As we said, for Newman human actions can revert by reflection and be considered inside of every person to contemplate Truth. He emphasizes judgment as a part of the specification of Prudence, which Aristotle was developed in book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trough the contemplation a person can reflect and taste the Truth inside of her. This is the achievement and the highest goal of human life, reaching Wisdom, σοφία, or *sapientae* in latin, which comes from *sapere*: "to taste" personally the Truth.

Thus Illative Sense of Newman offers nuances to the Aristotelian concept of virtue and its development by habituation, giving priority to love in the contemplation of Truth by the human being. Not so frequently can a person achieve a fully virtuous life without having learned habits in childhood. This can be achieved in adulthood by means of a full conversion to the Truth in her Conscience and the consequent radical transformation of one's character: "The lesson is that children who have not been brought up in good habits need to be exposed to the sort of transformative forces that can make radical

self-change, through the contemplative route, possible” (Kristjánsson, 2014a, p. 481). Extremely painful situations, for example, can cause the birth of a virtuous life. This can be operated by a personal conversion (Kristjánsson, 2014a, p. 480), or also by other circumstances, such as falling in love. In Newman there is also a possibility of a degenerative process —loss of virtues and gain of vices—, not only by an absence of adequate practices but mainly by a denial of what the Illative Sense shows to the person.

Newman portrays a religious perspective to Prudence that would be of great value in the education of character, because he is basing the full achievement of excellence on a transcendental world. Newman’s concept of Illative Sense can be interpreted as the enrichment of a poor model of the development of virtues where personal growth is sometimes offered to educator as a common and aseptic rule —the Aristotelian metaphor of the famous rule of Lesbos— applicable as norm to the development of virtues for every citizen. Newman’s proposal of the Illative Sense is to locate the personal development of character in a place that is more transcendental than Aristotle’s. For Newman, the character of a person cannot be completely educated without the idea of a Conscience that looks for transcendent and religious elements.

It is therefore pertinent to speak of the consciousness and the influence of Christianity and Modernity in the Newmanian approach, since that inner world —the *intus*— is, unlike Aristotle, real and mysterious at the same time: “It is the mind itself that detects them in their obscure recesses, illustrates them, establishes them, eliminates them, resolves them into simpler ideas, as the case may be” (Newman, 1903, 361). In this sense, Newman is also opposed to religious individualism of conscience, which, following the Lutheran and Calvinist theses, conceives the personal world as an untouchable element inscribed in the center of individual life to which the educator should never access under the risk of dogmatism and manipulation.

Finally, as we comment, unlike Aristotle, the formation in the Illative Sense does not establish differences amongst people of different cultures, societies, and religions. His function is not to differentiate human being or protect the “citizens” —the Western habitants— from the barbarians. Since all men are human beings, everybody has a personal Illative sense that moves them in their individual search for Truth, also with latent and non-tangible elements. Personal prestige, elements like trusting others and religious and human faith, are exercised in a universal community by those who are personally seeking the Truth. That is why, for Newman, the Illative Sense is the base of a real prudential decision and it can be mediated by other people. Conscience is a source of real example and authority. Spiritual life in the community acts in this way, indirectly shaping Prudence and personal character.

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