

# The Certainty of Faith: A Problem for Christian Fallibilists?

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**Abstract:** According to epistemic fallibilism, we cannot be certain of anything. According to the Christian tradition, faith comes with certainty. I develop this dilemma from recent accounts of fallibilism and various representatives of the Christian tradition. I then argue that on John Henry Newman's account of faith the dilemma is merely apparent. Finally, I develop Newman's account of the certainty that accompanies faith and is compatible with fallibilism.

## Introduction

Epistemological fallibilism is an attempt to account for the conjunction of the fact of human knowledge and the profound limitations of human knowing. Contemporary epistemologists agree, with few exceptions (e.g., Dodd (2011)), that fallibilism is true. One prominent articulation of fallibilism is that we only have fallible reasons for our beliefs, which means that our evidence does not entail the truth of our beliefs and thus precludes certainty. In light of our limitations, claiming to have certainty about propositions like 'Jesus of Nazareth was born of a virgin,' or 'God exists as three persons in one substance' seems extravagant. But this is precisely what Christianity claims. So, there is an apparent dilemma for Christian fallibilists. On the one hand, if fallibilism is true, it seems we cannot have certainty. On the other hand, the dominant tradition in Christian theology teaches that faith comes with certainty. Christian fallibilists must then either give up one side of this dilemma or find a way to unite what seems incompatible.

In this paper, I consider John Henry Newman as a test case.<sup>1</sup> Newman is a clear and notable representative of the certainty-of-faith tradition. So, if his thought is consistent with fallibilism, there is good reason to think the tradition in general is. Moreover, Newman, like us, comes after the modern

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<sup>1</sup> For references to the *Grammar of Assent*, I will refer to the chapter and subsection where applicable, followed by the page number (e.g., *Grammar*, 8:2, 252) from the following edition: John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: Doubleday, 1955, Image Books edition)

philosophical project, which, partially due to the growing diversity of religious views, is keenly aware of skeptical problems. So, Newman's account of certainty is developed in a context where his Christianity and then Catholicism are not taken for granted. Another benefit to considering Newman is that he engages John Locke, who argues that we should only believe in proportion to our evidence. So, Newman is developing his account in more epistemological terms, which allows his thought to be more easily related to contemporary fallibilism than many earlier theologians.

I argue that Newman's teaching on the certainty of faith is compatible with fallibilism. First I offer some background on the dilemma, showing why it needs to be taken seriously. Next I contrast three types of certainty and show that fallibilism only need deny epistemic certainty. Finally I explain the kind of certainty Newman thinks comes with faith, and show that it does not require epistemic certainty.

## The Problem

In *Rationality and Religious Commitment* (2011) Robert Audi distinguishes seven different faith locutions. (53-4) Whether or not they are all importantly distinct, two of them are relevant for our discussion. First, there is what Audi calls "propositional faith" which is a propositional attitude. Propositional faith is distinguished from "creedal faith" which is "the set of tenets designated by 'a religion faith.'" (53) My claim is that the Christian tradition teaches that the propositional attitude of faith includes certainty.<sup>2</sup> More formally, the certainty-of-faith teaches the following: if S has faith that  $p$ , then  $p$  is certain for S.

It is not difficult to find Christian theologians throughout the tradition who teach that faith comes with certainty or fallibilists who deny that certainty is possible. I offer just a sampling of theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, as representative of the certainty-of-faith tradition. After looking at the understanding of faith in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, John Chrysostom, and Augustine, John R.T. Lamont (2004) explains:

All of them react to pagan criticism of the irrationality of Christian belief by flatly contradicting it. They claim that it is rational; and the reason they give for its rationality is the fact that it is believing in God, who has the highest possible degree of authority. This authority gives faith a certainty that is equal to, or greater than, that of any other kind of knowledge. (46)

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<sup>2</sup> I qualify this later allowing for faith without certainty, which is a type of deficient or imperfect faith.

According to these early church fathers, if something is held by faith, then, because it is accepted on the authority of God, it is certain.

Aquinas and Calvin agree. Aquinas distinguishes faith from both knowledge and opinion. After arguing that knowledge is assent through the intellect's vision of its object, Aquinas explains:

Secondly the intellect assents to something, not through being sufficiently moved to this assent by its proper object, but through an act of choice, whereby it turns voluntarily to one side rather than to the other: and if this be accompanied by doubt or fear of the opposite side, there will be opinion, while, if there be certainty and no fear of the other side, there will be faith. (*Summa Theologiæ* II-II.1.4)<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere he claims, in continuity with the patristic tradition, "the certainty that the divine light gives is greater than that which the light of natural reason gives" (*Summa Theologiæ* II-II.171.5.ad 3). Calvin places the certainty of faith in his definition of faith, "Faith is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favour toward us." (*Institutes*, III.II.7) Explaining this definition, he later expands, "The certainty which [faith] requires must be full and decisive, as is usual in regard to matters ascertained and proved." (*Institutes*, III.II.14) So, Aquinas and Calvin both think that faith comes with certainty.

The certainty-of-faith tradition continues into later catechisms as well. Notice that both certainty and lack of doubt are found in questions 21 and 22 of the Heidelberg Catechism,

**Q. 21.** What is true faith?

**A.** True faith is not only a *sure* knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also a hearty trust, which the Holy Ghost works in me by the Gospel, that not only to others, but to me also, forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits.

**Q. 22.** What is then necessary for a Christian to believe?

**A.** All that is promised us in the Gospel, which the articles of our catholic *undoubted* Christian faith teach us in summary. (Dennison 2010, 744-5, emphasis mine)

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *De Veritate* 14.2.ad 15.

Similarly, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states the doctrine plainly. “Faith is *certain*. It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie” (Catholic Church 1994, §157). So, the certainty-of-faith tradition – if  $S$  has faith that  $p$ , then  $p$  is certain for  $S$  – is prevalent in the Christian tradition.

Epistemic fallibilism is an attempt to provide a rigorous and precise account of the intersection of two widespread intuitions. On the one hand it is all too apparent that we could be wrong about much that we believe. Both the sheer number of incompatible views we encounter daily and the changing of views through history makes the fallibility of our knowing apparent. The difficulty of producing convincing replies to skeptical scenarios similarly manifests our fallibility. (Cf. Leite (2010), 371ff; Reed (2012), 585) On the other hand, knowledge is widespread; we all know many things. Yet, most of our everyday knowledge – what I had for dinner yesterday or who is currently President – is of the kind – knowledge reliant on memory or testimony – that we get wrong relatively often. Thus Leite (2010) claims, “In the end, careful attention to the details of our ordinary practices of knowledge attribution provides the best basis for accepting fallibilism.” (372) Although there are a variety of fallibilisms, most contemporary epistemologists hold some sort of epistemic fallibilism.<sup>4</sup>

Fallibilism has been formulated in a variety of ways. Stanley (2005) offers a standard formulation in terms of logical consistency: “Fallibilism is the doctrine that someone can know that  $p$ , even though their evidence for  $p$  is *logically consistent* with the truth of not- $p$ .” (127) Reed (2012) offers another general formulation: “According to a rough formulation of this view, it is possible for a subject to have knowledge even in cases where the justification or grounding for the knowledge is compatible with the subject’s being mistaken.” (585) Anderson (2014) recently offered the following formulation in an attempt to be neutral between versions of fallibilism: “knowledge is compatible with a chance of error.” (598) Although one could formulate an externalist or reliabilist version of fallibilism – the fallibility of our faculties explains the fallibility of knowledge – I focus on internalist accounts in this paper. (See Dougherty (2011), Reed (2012), and Leite (2010) for discussions of versions of fallibilism and its history.)

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Leite (2010), after explaining the fundamental intellectual stance underlying fallibilism claims, “Contemporary epistemologists almost universally agree in endorsing this intellectual stance; it is part of the undisputed framework within which contemporary epistemological theorizing takes place.” (370) Similarly, Reed (2012) “Although there are still some defenders of infallibilism, it has largely been supplanted by fallibilism as the dominant framework in contemporary epistemology.” (586) Anderson (2014) says the following about her general formulation of fallibilism, “There is all but unanimous agreement in contemporary epistemology that knowledge is compatible with a chance of error.” (598)

Christian fallibilists should see compatibility with the certainty-of-faith tradition as a desideratum of their views. In arguing for the compatibility of fallibilism and the certainty-of-faith tradition, two types of fallibilism initially appear to be promising solutions. First, some versions of fallibilism are not fully general; some early accounts of fallibilism do not apply to necessary truths.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the certainty-of-faith tradition desideratum could be satisfied regarding *some* propositions. But because key doctrines of Christianity are about contingent things, such accounts don't resolve the dilemma. Second, at least one version of fallibilism satisfies this desideratum by allowing for certainty. Littlejohn (2011) argues that as something added to knowledge to achieve epistemic necessity, certainty resolves some of the fallibilists' problems. Instead of dealing with either of these types of fallibilism though, I take another route. Contrary to the first apparent solution, I consider a fully general account of fallibilism. Contrary to the second apparent solution, I consider a fallibilism that denies the possibility of certainty. A version of fallibilism with these two features is more apparently in conflict with the certainty-of-faith tradition, which makes showing their compatibility more difficult. Yet the difficulty comes with a reward. If I show that a fully general version of fallibilism that denies certainty is compatible with the certainty-of-faith tradition, then I provide reason to think that fallibilism and the certainty-of-faith tradition are compatible.

Dougherty and Rysiew (2009, 2011) and Dougherty (2011) offer such a version of fallibilism. "Fallibilism is the thesis that we cannot be certain of anything."<sup>6</sup> (Dougherty 2011, 141) Fallibilism, according to this view, is built on the insight that in every case, our reasons for believing  $p$  do not guarantee the truth of  $p$ . The reason skeptical scenarios can't merely be dismissed is that they explain all the evidence we have for our realist beliefs. (Cross 2010) Dougherty and Rysiew's view has two virtues for our purposes. First, their probabilistic account of evidence is plausible and clear.<sup>7</sup> Our evidence for our beliefs is supportive without being guaranteeing.  $S$ 's evidence for  $p$  then affects the probability of  $p$  for  $S$ . Second, Dougherty's generalized account clearly articulates both motivating intuitions. It allows knowledge to be common because probabilities often reach the knowledge threshold, and it recognizes the chance of error because our evidence doesn't guarantee the truth of our beliefs. Yet, like any version of fallibilism, it is not accepted by all.

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<sup>5</sup> Inapplicability to necessary truths is usually considered a weakness for a version of fallibilism. Advanced theorems in math, for example, are necessary truths that we might be wrong about. See Reed (2012, 586).

<sup>6</sup> If a fallibilist maintains the possibility of certainty about necessary truths, then the principle can be modified with the following clause: "that is a contingent truth." The clause will not allow fallibilists to escape the dilemma though, for some of what Christians believe by faith is contingent, e.g., Jesus of Nazareth was born of a virgin.

<sup>7</sup> Dougherty and Rysiew (2009) also state their principle in non-probabilistic terms. (127)

On the one hand, Dougherty rejects the “standard model” of epistemic necessity, which connects epistemic necessity to knowledge. For Dougherty and Rysiew,  $p$  is epistemically necessary for  $S$  iff  $p$  has unit probability for  $S$ . But knowledge, on this account, does not require unit probability. In any case, the nature of epistemic necessity is a matter of contention. (See Hawthorne (2012) for a defense of the standard model against Dougherty and Rysiew (2009, 2011).) On the other hand, epistemological externalists would favor an externalist account of fallibilism. Leite (2010) suggests the following reliabilist account: “one can have knowledge even if one’s epistemic position does not entail the truth of the belief in question.” (371) My argument can be extended to externalist versions of fallibilism as well.<sup>8</sup> Of course focusing on Dougherty and Rysiew’s account prevents my solution from showing *every* type of fallibilism is compatible with the certainty-of-faith. But because showing the compatibility requires examining the details of both sides of the dilemma, it is more salutary to consider actual views than toy theories.

So, if, as Dougherty and Rysiew argue, our evidence never guarantees the truth of our beliefs, we can never be certain of those beliefs. More formally, on this especially problematic formulation of fallibilism, for any  $p$  that  $S$  believes, necessarily  $p$  is not certain for  $S$ . Taking Dougherty and Rysiew’s version of fallibilism as a test case, the Christian tradition and fallibilism, then, seem to be incompatible. To put it starkly, if  $S$ ’s faith that  $p$  requires that  $p$  is certain for  $S$ , then fallibilism entails that it is impossible for  $S$  to have faith that  $p$ . In the next section I take the first step toward showing this to be a merely apparent incompatibility by distinguishing three types of certainty and further explaining the nature of Dougherty and Rysiew’s fallibilism.

## Fallibilism and Certainties

Our first step toward reconciling fallibilism with the certainty-of-faith tradition is to be clear about the kind of certainty fallibilists deny. Initially, I distinguish three types of certainty: epistemic, moral, and psychological. Fallibilists only deny the possibility of epistemic certainty:

*Epistemic certainty:  $p$  has epistemic certainty for  $S$  iff  $p$  has an epistemic probability of one for  $S$ .*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Grimm (2001) argues that Newman’s epistemology has a lot in common with Reformed epistemology, which makes extending my argument plausible.

<sup>9</sup> Although this is the operative version of epistemic certainty in this account of fallibilism, weaker versions are available, see Reed (2011).

This means that if one has epistemic certainty that  $p$ , then one has no evidence against  $p$ . Dougherty's following two statements of the fallibilist thesis, which he considers equivalent, make it clear that he denies that we can attain epistemic certainty:

*Probability version:* "Fallibilism is the thesis that, necessarily, any belief we might have has an epistemic probability less than one."

*Certainty version:* "Fallibilism is the thesis that we cannot be certain of anything." (Dougherty 2011, 141)

Although fallibilists of this sort deny that epistemic certainty is possible, it does not follow that fallibilists must deny the possibility of every kind of certainty. One option for fallibilists who wish to preserve the certainty of faith is to assign moral certainty to faith:

*Moral certainty* –  $p$  has moral certainty for  $S$  iff (i)  $p$  has sufficient probability for  $S$  to act on  $p$  with reasonable confidence of success, (ii)  $p$  has sufficient probability to preclude doubt for  $S$ , and (iii)  $p$  is not epistemically certain for  $S$ .<sup>10</sup>

Although not stated in terms of probabilities, Descartes's account of moral certainty is similar to the above. "Moral certainty is certainty which is sufficient to regulate our behavior, or which measures up to the certainty we have on matters relating to the conduct of life which we never normally doubt, though we know that it is possible, absolutely speaking, that they may be false." (Reed 2011, §1) Condition (iii) is sufficient for epistemic certainty

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<sup>10</sup> Although 'moral certainty' is a common term, Newman rarely uses it because of its "vague meaning." (*Grammar* 8:2, 252) Although Collins (1959) calls Newman's doctrine of certainty "moral certainty," he recognizes that it differs from moral certainty as defined here, "Newman's usage must be distinguished carefully from that of Descartes and many modern Scholastic authors, who regard moral certitude as being quite weak and as standing in contrast with metaphysical and physical certitude." (367) For a helpful history of moral certainty see Franklin (2001) especially chapter 4. In his comments on my paper at the American Catholic Philosophical Association, Stephen Grimm expressed concern that my definition of moral certainty is too easy to satisfy. I take this to be an objection to moral certainty actually being a kind of certainty instead of an objection to my account. The Collins quote above shows others have similarly criticized moral certainty, a view shared by Franklin (2001), "[Moral certainty] is a dangerous phrase nevertheless, tending to suggest as it does that something that is not certain *is* certain. Just as a suspected criminal is not a kind of criminal, so moral certainty is not a kind of certainty." (70)

and moral certainty to be incompatible, although epistemic certainty entails conditions (i) and (ii) of moral certainty.

It is also important to clarify what kind of doubt is excluded in moral certainty, since it does not exclude all types of doubt. Moral certainty need not exclude doubt as a feeling of discomfort about believing  $p$ . Instead, moral certainty excludes doubt as a doxastic attitude, which is a suspension of belief.<sup>11</sup> While discussing Newman's account of faith, J.R.T. Lamont (1996) offers the following helpful example of someone having the feeling of doubt about some  $p$  without having the doxastic attitude of doubt toward that same  $p$ : "A paranoid man can have an overwhelmingly strong feeling that his friends are lying to him and deceiving him, while recognizing that he is paranoid, and that his feelings are due to his paranoia and have no rational basis" (69).

Another type of certainty is also available to fallibilists:

*Psychological Certainty* –  $p$  has psychological certainty for  $S$  iff  $S$  is maximally convinced of  $p$ 's truth. (Reed 2011, §1)

Also called "subjective certainty," psychological certainty is related to moral and epistemic certainty in the following ways. Although related to condition (ii) of moral certainty, psychological certainty is not entailed by moral certainty because one can have sufficient probability to exclude doubt about  $p$  in ordinary life without being maximally convinced that  $p$ . Psychological certainty does not entail moral certainty because of conditions (i) and (iii), but having psychological certainty might appear sufficient to satisfy (ii). Yet, because conviction and probabilities come apart,  $S$  can have utter confidence that  $p$  despite  $p$  having low probability for  $S$ .<sup>12</sup> Finally, if one's conviction matches her evidence, epistemic certainty entails psychological certainty, since  $p$  having a probability of one for  $S$  is one way for  $S$  to be maximally convinced of  $p$ . But because convictions often do not match evidence, psychological certainty and epistemic certainty do not entail each other.

Thus, if the certainty of faith is not epistemic certainty and does not entail epistemic certainty, then it is compatible with fallibilism. We now turn to John Henry Newman as a representative of the Christian tradition to see if the certainty of faith requires epistemic certainty. As we'll see, it doesn't.

## Newman and the Certainty of Faith

Newman is clear that faith requires certainty:

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<sup>11</sup> This is Newman's normal use of "doubt," see "Faith and Doubt" in Newman (2002).

<sup>12</sup> Thank you to Chris Tweedt for pointing this out to me.



Faith has two peculiarities;—it is most certain, decided, positive, immovable in its assent, and it gives this assent not because it sees with eye, or sees with the reason, but because it receives the tidings from one who comes from God. (Newman 2002, 195-6)

Newman's account of certainty is primarily developed in *A Grammar of Assent*, but he discusses faith and certainty throughout his writings.<sup>13</sup> I first offer two arguments to show that for Newman, the certainty of faith is incompatible with epistemic certainty. Then I develop a purely epistemological version of Newman's account of certainty that is available to fallibilists. First, Newman contrasts two types of certainty in a key passage in the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. Newman here offers the following outline of his account of the certainty that accompanies faith in relation to probabilities:

My argument is in outline as follows: that that absolute certitude which we are able to possess, whether as to the truths of natural theology, or as to the fact of a revelation, was the result of an *assemblage* of concurring and converging probabilities, and that both according to the constitution of the human mind and the will of its maker; that certitude was a habit of mind, that certainty was a quality of propositions; that probabilities which did not reach to logical certainty, might create a mental certitude; that the certitude thus created might equal in measure and strength the certitude which was created by the strictest scientific demonstration... (Newman 1950, Part III: 49-50)

Two terminological clarifications are needed. First, Newman speaks of both certainty and certitude in this passage, which he distinguishes in the following way: "Certitude is a mental state: certainty is a quality of propositions. Those propositions I call certain, which are such that I am certain of them." (*Grammar* 9, 271) Because certainty is a function of certitude, certainty is indexed to the person and is not an objective property of propositions. The second terminological point concerns what Newman calls "absolute certitude" in this passage. Instead of "absolute" I use "Newman" and translate this into certainty language. The resulting 'Newman certainty' is the term I will use for Newman's account of certainty, which he usually just refers to as "certainty."

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<sup>13</sup> Developing a robust account of faith was one of Newman's lifelong projects that sees its most rigorous and mature treatment in *Grammar of Assent*, see Norris (2009), 73-4. Also see Newman (1976).

Although Newman does not provide an analysis of logical certainty, the contrastive nature of the text supports that he thinks Newman certainty is incompatible with epistemic certainty. On the one hand, if logical certainty entails epistemic certainty, which is plausible, then Newman certainty is contrasted with epistemic certainty in that the former does not achieve the latter's unit probability. On the other hand, if logical certainty only reaches some near-one probability, then neither logical nor Newman certainty achieve the probability of epistemic certainty. So, on either reading, Newman certainty has a probability of less than one and cannot be epistemic certainty. Moreover, the contrast suggests that not being epistemic certainty is a necessary condition for Newman certainty.

The second argument that Newman certainty does not require epistemic certainty is from the merit of faith. In his sermon "Faith and Doubt," he explains:

It requires no act of faith to assent to the truth that two and two make four; we cannot help assenting to it; and hence there is no merit in assenting to it; but there is merit in believing that the Church is from God; for though there are abundant reasons to prove it to us, yet we can, without an absurdity, quarrel with the conclusion; we may complain that it is not clearer, we may suspend our assent, we may doubt about it, if we will, and grace alone can turn a bad will into a good one.<sup>14</sup>

In order for faith to be meritorious, it cannot *require* assent in the same way basic mathematical truths do. Instead, there must be some measure of freedom in responding to the evidence. Although this raises important questions about the role of the will in belief, questions about which Newman has a lot to contribute,<sup>15</sup> these issues do not concern us here. What concerns us is Newman's reasoning for thinking the will is able to have any such role. Because the evidence for Christian truths is not like the evidence for simple mathematical truths, the assent to Christian truths is free and can be meritorious. An epistemic probability of less than one is required to allow for such freedom. Thus, if  $p$  is part of the Christian faith, its epistemic probability is less than one.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Newman (2002) "Faith and Doubt," 225. Rosario Athié (2005) provides a brief background to the collection of sermons that "Faith and Doubt" is in and discusses his comparison of the inadmissibility of doubt in both faith and friendship through an example of one of Newman's friendships.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Aquino (2004), Ross (1986), and Ferreira (1980).

<sup>16</sup> Here I am referring to those beliefs that are called the "articles of faith" and only knowable through revelation, e.g., Jesus of Nazareth is fully God and fully man. Other propositions are part of the Christian faith as preambles, but the merit of faith is not required, e.g., 'God exists.'

From these two arguments, I conclude that Newman certainty is incompatible with epistemic certainty. Thus Newman's account of certainty is compatible with fallibilism. So, fallibilism is compatible with the certainty-of-faith tradition. Yet, I have only shown a negative component of Newman's account so far. In the remainder of this section, I develop a positive account of Newman certainty.

Newman offers three other conditions for Newman certainty:

It seems then that on the whole there are three conditions of certitude: that it follows on investigation and proof, that it is accompanied by a specific sense of intellectual satisfaction and repose, and that it is irreversible. (*Grammar* 7:2, 207)

Newman spends much of *Grammar of Assent* offering a defense of how certitude can arise from an investigation in which no line of evidence has unit probability. Although Newman thinks formal inference hinders us attaining certainty due to the necessary deficiency of the abstraction required in syllogistic reasoning, he thinks certitude is achieved through "natural" reasoning. (*Grammar* 8:1, 226-7; 8:2, 232) Abstracting from the particulars saps our natural reasoning of some of the evidential power of those particulars. So, instead of a formal syllogism, natural reasoning:

is the cumulation of probabilities, independent of each other, arising out of the nature and circumstances of the particular case, which is under review; probabilities too fine to avail separately, too subtle and circuitous to be convertible into syllogisms, too numerous and various for such conversion, even were they convertible. (*Grammar* 8:2, 230, 233ff)

Through the convergence of probabilities and a kind of insight analogous to prudence in practical matters we attain certainty from probabilities. More formally, if  $p$  has Newman certainty for  $S$ , then  $S$  has rationally attained belief that  $p$  through the accumulation of probabilities.

The second condition of Newman certainty is an accompanying sense of satisfaction: "It is a feeling of satisfaction and self-gratulation, of intellectual security, arising out of a sense of success, attainment, possession, finality, as regards the matter which has been in question." (*Grammar* 6:2, 168) I borrow Newman's phrase "intellectual security" to refer to this condition. The feeling that accompanies Newman certainty is a confidence achieved through apparently reaching one's intellectual goal. Having sought

an answer or explanation, one is now secure in her belief. So, if  $p$  has Newman certainty for  $S$ , then  $S$  has intellectual security that  $p$ .<sup>17</sup>

The third condition of certainty is what Newman calls the “indefectibility” of certainty. Newman thinks that certainty is the “perception of a truth with the perception that it is a truth.” (*Grammar* 6:2, 163) Because truth cannot change, certitude cannot fail. (*Grammar* 7:2, 181) In other words, Newman thinks that the truth of  $p$  guarantees that one’s certainty that  $p$  will not fail. If one’s certainty that  $p$  fails, Newman thinks it was only apparent certainty, which reduces to something like conviction or prejudice. So, we have the third condition of Newman certainty: if  $p$  has Newman certainty for  $S$ , then if  $p$  is true this certainty cannot fail.<sup>18</sup>

Putting these conditions together we get the following account of Newman certainty:

*Newman Certainty:*  $p$  has Newman certainty for  $S$  iff (a)  $p$  is not epistemically certain for  $S$ , (b)  $S$  has rationally attained belief that  $p$  through an accumulation of probabilities, (c)  $S$  has intellectual security that  $p$ , (d)  $p$  is true, and (e) this certainty cannot fail.

Before moving on, I need to make two clarifications. First, what Newman is describing here is the certainty that comes with faith, not faith itself. Newman does not think that this certainty is limited to what is known by faith. The truths of faith might have a distinct grounding (e.g., God’s revelation) for their Newman certainty, but Newman certainty can be grounded by other things as well. Second, the certainty of faith is something that ideally comes with faith, but may not be an essential property of faith. For example, if one is troubled by objections and his faith becomes insecure, thus not meeting condition (c), faith might remain. With these clarifications in mind, we can return to Newman certainty.

Newman certainty then has a metaphysical condition, (d), with its claimed consequence, (e). Since I am interested in an epistemological account of certainty, I remove conditions (d) and (e). Although not strictly epistemological, I leave (c) because it clarifies the nature of Newman certainty in a way relevant to epistemological discussions. Moreover, leaving (d) and (e) behind allows us to avoid the controversies surrounding Newman’s indefectibility doctrine and focus on the remaining, plausible

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<sup>17</sup> Although related, I’m not going to address the concern that Newman collapses the distinction between the epistemological and the psychological that has been addressed by Aquino (2004), Jay Newman (1986), and Ferrara (1980). I thank Frederick Aquino for pointing this out to me.

<sup>18</sup> Newman is aware that certainties seem to fail for reasons other than the falsity of their object (e.g., people lose their faith). Examining Newman’s account of indefectibility and its problems is beyond the scope of this paper, but is discussed by Ferreira (1980), 103-113, and Pailin (1969).

account of certainty Newman offers. One might object to altering Newman's account in this way, but he was keenly aware that the metaphysical conditions are not something we have special access to. It is this epistemological strain of Newman's thought that I am interested in. Notice the following passages:

Certitude does not admit of an interior, immediate test, sufficient to discriminate it from false certitude. (*Grammar* 7:2, 205)

No line can be drawn between such real certitudes as have truth for their object, and apparent certitudes. No distinct test can be named, sufficient to discriminate between what may be called the false prophet and the true. What looks like certitude always is exposed to the chance of turning out to be a mistake. (*Grammar* 7:2, 182)<sup>19</sup>

Newman's recognition of our epistemological limitations here count as a confirmation that his account is compatible with fallibilism. Compare these passages to Dougherty's reasoning in favor of fallibilism, explaining how his view applies to necessary truths.

It may not *in fact* be possible that I am mistaken, yet I still cannot be *certain* that any belief is true because I cannot discriminate between episodes of veridical experience and deceptive experience. (Dougherty 2011, 139)

Thus we arrive at an epistemological version of Newman's view of certainty:

*Epistemological Newman Certainty* [ENC]: *S* has epistemological Newman certainty that *p* if (a) *S* does not have epistemic certainty that *p*, (b) *S* has rationally attained belief that *p* through an accumulation of probabilities and (c) *S* has intellectual security that *p*.<sup>20</sup>

It remains to compare ENC to the other kinds of certainty discussed above. Epistemic certainty and ENC are incompatible because of (a). Psychological

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<sup>19</sup> Passages like these raise the problem of the common measure, which is taken up by Aquino (2004), especially chapters 3 and 4; Jay Newman (1986); Wainwright (1995), chapter 2. I thank Frederick Aquino for pointing this out to me.

<sup>20</sup> ENC is close to what Newman sometimes calls "conviction," e.g., *Grammar* 3:2, 85; 7:2, 182, 203.

certainty is not entailed by ENC. Although an achieved confidence, intellectual security need not be maximal conviction. Moreover, because psychological certainty can be detached from inquiry and reflection, i.e., it can be irrational, psychological certainty does not entail intellectual security. Of course someone could have both psychological certainty and intellectual security.

Although less obvious, moral certainty is also entailed by ENC, but not vice versa.

*Moral certainty* –  $p$  has moral certainty for  $S$  iff (i)  $p$  has sufficient probability for  $S$  to act on  $p$  with reasonable confidence of success, (ii)  $p$  has sufficient probability to preclude doubt for  $S$ , and (iii)  $p$  is not epistemically certain for  $S$ .

Condition (a) of ENC is identical to condition (iii) of moral certainty. Condition (b) of ENC refers to the achievement of recognizing that  $p$  has a very high probability on one's evidence through an act of the illative sense, i.e., an insight. The probability of  $p$  for  $S$  on (b) entails both (i) and (ii). Moreover, intellectual security that  $p$  entails (ii), that one does not doubt that  $p$ . So, ENC entails moral certainty.

Although one of the guiding concerns of this paper has been preserving the certainty-of-faith tradition, I have so far said very little about faith. One might think ENC has little to do with Christian faith for two reasons. First, faith is a simple trust instead of the product of a long reasoning process. Newman is aware that his account of certainty involves a degree of reflection not required for Christian faith, acknowledging that maybe many Christians do not have Newman certainty:

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...

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. (*Grammar* 7:1, 174-5)

Newman calls such certainty “material” or “interpretative” certainty. (*Grammar* 7:1, 174) If challenged, interpretive certainty overcomes the objection or counter-evidence and becomes Newman certainty. Second, faith is given by God, but ENC appears to be a human achievement. Although it was not his focus, Newman does not overlook the supernatural aspect of faith; he also thinks faith is a gift from God.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Newman’s account of certainty should not be read as an overly reflective and human account. Instead, the epistemological focus should be taken as an indication of the questions Newman was trying to answer.

## Conclusion

Epistemological Newman Certainty does not include or entail epistemic certainty. In fact, it is incompatible with epistemic certainty. Thus, fallibilism’s denial of certainty is compatible with Newman’s account of certainty. Although Newman’s account is not the only way of resolving the apparent dilemma for Christian fallibilists between the certainty-of-faith tradition and the impossibility of certainty in fallibilism, his resolution does two important things. First, it provides a rigorous account of the certainty of faith that is consistent with fallibilism. Second, and more importantly, it shows that reading the certainty-of-faith tradition through fallibilist eyes does not need to do violence to the tradition.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Newman (2002) “Faith and Doubt,” 224. Newman offers a brief but suggestive connection between the act of the illative sense in Christian faith and divine illumination in *Grammar* 9:1, 276.

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