

## Article

# Phenomenology of Conversion: John H. Newman and Aurel Kolnai

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**Abstract:** This essay considers J. H. Newman's and Aurel Kolnai's conversions from a phenomenological point of view. Newman's conversion or conversions are often cited as classic examples, though he was reluctant to use this notion, preferring to see his journey as a long process, an account of which is provided in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. His *Grammar of Assent* is less often cited in this context, but it helps more to make sense of conversion as an *experience*. Kolnai was a phenomenologist himself. He also provided a personal account of his conversion in his autobiography. The two thinkers' reflections on conversion are highly congruent, highlighting four dimensions: familiarity or homecoming (conversion makes one at peace with oneself); discovery of reality or real meaning of a notion (of truth, of God, of the scriptures, of the Church); the paramount importance of conscience (the indispensability of the approval of moral authority); the intelligibility of conversion which makes it, in the end, the proper subject of philosophical inquiry.

**Keywords:** conversion; Newman; Kolnai; familiarity; reality; conscience; intelligibility



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## 1. Introduction

Conversion is usually understood as a paradigmatically religious experience. It is generally thought to contain an inexplicable and incommunicable moment, an encounter with a sort of reality that, for many people, simply does not exist. Therefore, it would seem that it cannot be analyzed by means of phenomenology. However, to such people, perhaps counterintuitively, a surprising number of philosophers and influential thinkers have provided various pieces of evidence of their conversion, including a number of phenomenologists, with Edith Stein being probably the most prominent one. This alone does not invalidate the presumption against the possibility of a phenomenological analysis of conversion but serves as a warning against making premature conclusions. In what follows, I try to offer such an analysis of conversion based on experiences of which important thinkers have given account of. I rely on J. H. Newman, in some sense the archetypal modern convert, as well as Aurel Kolnai, one of the most interesting realist phenomenologists. Before going into the details, since the very concept of 'conversion' requires clarification, let me make a few related points.

## 2. Conceptual Clarification

The first is that the notion of conversion has been applied to non-religious experiences as well. One may convert to a new truth, a cause, or an ideology. In his book on E. Stein, Alasdair MacIntyre (2006) discusses G. Lukács' case as well, particularly his sudden conversion to Bolshevism in December 1918. Apart from even more frivolous usages of the notion (conversion to a style, to a party, to a fashion), the analogy between religious and non-religious cases of conversions holds if certain factors such as sincerity, honesty, courage, and so on, are also obtained. At the border, a conversion to atheism is also a possibility. In this general sense, "[c]onversion accounts seem to mix the factual, the memorable, and the apologetical" (Ford 2014, p. 14). However, here I shall stick to the conventional meaning of conversion and consider it a chiefly religious event.

The second point is that despite the peculiarity of the experience inherent to all conversions, they may not contain a supernatural event, only an act of free will, a kind of metanoia. Conversions of the Pauline sort, with the dramatic event on the road to Damascus, or Pascal's mystical experience in 1654, are certainly difficult to explain in terms of rationalist/analytical philosophy (Thomas Aquinas himself had a vision on 6 December 1273, after which he confessed to being unable to continue with his *Summa*, the great edifice of analytical theology). Most conversions are arguably less dramatic and more procedural, involving a long and controlled process of discernment before a decision of some sort is taken. This again substantiates the interest in philosophical treatment of conversion.<sup>1</sup>

Thirdly, not all experiences we are wont to describe as 'mystical' or 'supernatural' are either pressing us toward conversion or are related to it at all. Jesus' disciples have seen his miracles and healings; they were often in awe, yet still could not 'convert' in the sense of having unconditional faith in him, not even after his resurrection. Thus, making sense of one's supernatural experiences, or encounters with the supernatural, may not be easy and not at all placed into the context of conversion. Further, some mystical experiences have been not, at least not directly, related to conversion, even though they have a great bearing on the person involved. One ought not to think that all conversions must involve a turning point in the sense of an unexpected revelation, touch, or vision. Such events may or may not be related to conversion and not necessarily endorsing it: the devil may have his own mystical powers. Paul the Apostle himself warned that mystical experiences alone can be highly dangerous. Discernment, again, including philosophical reflection, is not only possible but even recommended.

Fourthly, a cursory overview of historical conversions suggests that there are at least two basic types of religious conversion. One is the experience of return or confirmation. The prodigal son returns to his father, John the Baptist calls for repentance or penance, and Jesus himself begins preaching about the fullness of times, which involves a return to the 'real' meaning of the law, to the original purity and sanctity of creation and to the undistorted communicative love of God. The other type of religious conversion involves an experience of discovering a new reality: God, Jesus, faith, or the Church and its teachings. As a matter of fact, the gospels are nothing but stories of conversions, with John's Gospel literally culminating in Thomas the Apostle's final acceptance of Christ as God. However, these seemingly opposing experiences share the aspect of fundamental 'change,' a sort of metanoia, which is meant to produce a 'new' life in the person who converts. MacIntyre (2006) cites the parallel stories of Franz Rosenzweig, who converted 'backward' to 'his' Judaism and Adolf Reinach, who converted to Christianity. Both conversions were religious experiences. However, my presumption here is that a backward conversion involves the aspect of discovery and encountering a new reality, and a forward conversion also has some kind of coming-home aspect and with it, the aspect of return. A true experience of conversion is not a schizophrenic one. Rather, it is an imitation of the resurrection with its dual dimension, namely, a beginning of a new life but also a continuation of identity.

### 3. Four Aspects of Conversion: Familiarity, Discovery, Conscience, and Intelligibility

Newman's life and thinking have been the subject of many books and essays (Ker 1997; Christie 2022), as his 'story' has achieved the status of a paradigm case of conversion, or, better, conversions: commentators distinguish between his conversion to evangelicalism, then to Anglicanism, then to the apostolic tradition and the more Catholic version of Anglicanism, and finally, to Roman Catholicism (Ford 2014). Newman seems to have considered his first and last conversions decisive ones. I shall stick to his own interpretation and reflect on these two experiences. The point in discussing Newman's story again is to highlight how he himself tried, rather successfully, to render a proper philosophical explanation and conception in his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* [(Newman 1985), henceforth: *Es*]. This long essay is not a full-fledged phenomenological analysis, but it has

been hailed as close to such (Ekeh 2008) inasmuch as Newman's main concern was to offer a philosophical form of a subjective experience.

Much less known is Aurel Kolnai. He was a Hungarian-born philosopher with Jewish roots who joined the phenomenological movement very early and converted to the Catholic Church in 1925 at the age of 25. His doctoral dissertation, submitted around the same time, was a well-received treatise on the ethical theory of values, with many original ideas developed out of Scheler's conception of values. Kolnai's later career was rather perturbed for various reasons, and his reputation gained momentum only after his death in 1973. He is now considered a classic within realist phenomenology, especially the phenomenology of emotions (though the term is misleading, as Kolnai's main concern was the exploration of ethical reality, mostly of values, of which emotions are representations). Quite a lot has been written on his moral philosophy, a bit less on his political philosophy (also a highly original one), but very little on his religious views. This is partly due to the fact that his *apologia* is much shorter than Newman's, and it is included in his *Political Memoirs* (Kolnai 1999, henceforth *PM*), a singularly ill-titled and low-circulation book published posthumously. Nonetheless, the chapters on his conversion are highly interesting and provide us with a unique look at how a philosopher with great phenomenological expertise analyzes his own mind and memories.

Both Kolnai and Newman were extremely keen observers of their own thinking, and, as I shall argue, their conversions had some remarkable parallels, which alone justifies a comparative discussion. Moreover, Kolnai's conversion has not received its due attention; as far as I can tell, Newman's conversion(s) have also been analyzed mostly as unique and highly personal experiences, certainly a great inspiration to religious people and interesting, perhaps moving, to many sympathetic readers, but of limited philosophical value. It is just the phenomenological method which can, I contend, provide us with the necessary philosophical tools to make a philosophical sense of conversion. The presumption is very simple: an adequate phenomenological analysis of conversion must be based on a subjective experience which then must be subjected to a rigorous dissection of its major components, aspects, or dimensions. Such an analysis is not meant to provide a recipe, as it were, for *having* such an experience, since *to have* such an experience, a supernatural invitation is necessary. However, at least according to the Christian experience of conversion, *everybody* is invited, which makes conversions a common, shareable, and intelligible experience.

Given the limited scope of this essay, I shall highlight and discuss four aspects of conversion that appear to have been constitutive for both Newman's and Kolnai's experiences. They may be considered to provide for a *prima facie* approach to conversions in general, though, of course, I do not intend to present it as a full-fledged conception. In line with the phenomenological method, the goal is to provide a detailed and convincing description of experiencing a peculiar phenomenon.

First, somewhat counterintuitively, conversions convey an experience of *familiarity* as opposed to what may be called an experience of alienness, unexpectedness, or perhaps uncanniness.<sup>2</sup> This is related to the backward (identity-preserving) aspect of conversion. Both Newman and Kolnai were aware of how their pre-conversion commitments and self-understanding played crucial roles in their development. Neither underwent an unexpected change of heart or mind, and both worked hard to come to terms with their intellectual and moral environment.

Secondly, conversion involves a *discovery of reality* of a different sort which constitutes its forward-looking (identity-shaping) aspect. Of course, encountering God is presumably very different from encountering the truth (not in the form of a proposition such as 'the Church is right' or the 'Apostolic Creed is true' but probably in the form of discovering the truthfulness or verity of the Church). Nonetheless, there are layers of experiencing reality, a phenomenon widely known and accessible to non-converts. Neither Newman nor Kolnai 'had a vision,' witnessed a miraculous event, or received some personal revelation, but both were sensitive to realities beyond the self-evidently given, be it either material or conceptual. Newman was also a poet, and Kolnai was a connoisseur of reality, so to

speak, betraying a remarkably aesthetical attitude to the world understood in terms of aspects, shades, atmospheres, ambiances, mentalities, and so on. They possessed certain sensibilities that not all people do, but they were very keen on stating that their experiences and insights were communicable.

Thirdly, although ‘conversions’ are pre-eminently religious events or processes, Newman’s and Kolnai’s cases also demonstrate how certain non-religious experiences, such as being aware of one’s *conscience*, are decisive in making a plain sense of the religious experience of conversion. Conscience prefigures for Newman and Kolnai alike as a sense that falls beyond observable scientific reality, yet to most people, its existence is evidential. Hence, conversions backed by conscience are relatable events to ordinary people as well.

Fourth, both Newman and Kolnai were at pains to make their conversions accessible not only in terms of conscience but also as a *comprehensible* or intelligible process. As philosophers, they used certain concepts and categories in a technically sophisticated sense; this was meant to enhance communication between educated minds so as to make uncharted territories of experiences accessible to philosophy. At the same time, they insisted on explaining their conversion experiences in plain terms. It is up to us, the readers, to connect the biographical accounts of their conversions to their respective philosophical conceptions.

In the end, as I have pointed out earlier, conversions, prominently religious experiences, turn out to be very normal experiences: hardly a surprise in the history of Christianity, not only due to its past but also its present. It is probably a result of the great cultural change that goes by the name of secularization that conversions look unusual or inexplicable. The simple words of the *Acts of the Apostles* are arresting. After Peter’s first Pentecostal speech, “[t]hose who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (2:41).

#### 4. Newman’s First Conversion

At the very beginning of the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (henceforth: *Ap*), Newman recalls his first conversion experience in a perplexing paragraph: “When I was fifteen (...) a great change of thought took place in me. I fell under the influences of a definite Creed, and received in my intellect impressions of dogma, which, through God’s mercy, have never been effaced or obscured” (Newman 1968, p. 16). He continues with disowning another conviction he had, namely, of the Calvinist predestination, “the doctrine of final perseverance” (p. 16). He adds that “this inward conversion” still holds. Of it, “I was conscious (and of which I still am more certain than that I have hands and feet)” (p. 16). However, he also writes that his belief in having been chosen for eternal glory faded away gradually. Yet, again, Newman confirms that this experience of conversion has had a lasting impact on his character, as it also included a form of alienation, isolation, or detachment from the world and its material reality, leaving him with two ultimate subjects of reality, himself and God (p. 16).

This is an extremely dense summary of many things calling for a more detailed interpretation. As it happened, Newman was the first to do so. After having reported his childhood experience, Newman did not discuss it in the *Apologia* (1864) at a later stage, perhaps because his audience was more interested in his conversion to the Roman Catholic Church [RCC].<sup>3</sup> However, he does return to it in the *Essay* (1870). It seems to have escaped proper scholarly attention because there Newman presents this experience in an impersonal manner; though read in the light of the *Apologia*, this section of the *Essay* strikes the reader as highly autobiographical.<sup>4</sup> Here, he struggles to explain how belief in one God is engendered.<sup>5</sup> He professes that although he does not wish “to prove the Being of a God; yet I have found it impossible to avoid saying where I look for the proof of it” (*Ap* p. 73). He then proceeds to introduce the concept of conscience, briefly explaining it as a “special feeling” that causes us pleasure or pain, depending on the moral quality of our actions. In it, he argues, “lie the materials for the real apprehension of a Divine Sovereign and Judge (p. 73).” Conscience, he asserts, is a concept known to every (mature)

person, and more so than the concept of moral sense. Newman then provides us with an impeccably phenomenological account of how conscience works, what kinds of emotions bad and good conscience it arouses in us, what functions it fulfills (namely, critical, and judiciary), and how conscience compares to our aesthetical sense. Skipping this part and coming to the crux of the matter, how we realize God's presence through conscience, he invites the reader to imagine "an ordinary child," being raised in a manner that does not outrightly destroy religious instincts or impulses. Suppose, he writes, that the child has done something wrong, is aware of this, and wishes to redress his wrongdoing. Such awareness and resolution, Newman argues, entails a variety of emotions, including not only shame and remorse but also trust and consolation, love and openness, hope, and even pleasure, producing, as it were, "a strong and intimate vision of God" and an "Invisible Personal Power" (Ap p. 78). However, there is even more. Such an experience leads the child, via his "mental vision", to the "image of One", who does not merely command and instruct but *relies on the child's approval* of what is good and what is bad, especially what is good in its nascent but robust sense. Thereby, Newman concludes, the child is not yet able to recognize God "as a notion. Though he cannot explain or define the word 'God', when told to use it, his *acts* show that to him it is far more than a word" (Ap p. 79, italics added). This position is where one's mind arrives, and no longer in childhood but potentially in the last moments of a long life, "not only at a notional, but at an imaginative or real assent to the doctrine that there is One God, that is, an assent made with an apprehension, not only of what the words of the proposition mean, but of the object denoted by them" (Ap p. 82).

The description of a child's experience by an old man (Newman was sixty-nine when the *Essay* was published) with formidable intellectual powers and erudition may not ring very authentic, although I think most people do have vivid memories of some of their decisive childhood experiences (including myself, and I shall use such an experience later). However, it sounds convincing in terms of psychological and philosophical accuracy. Psychology is not my concern here, though it is worth noting that a standard objection to Newman's *Essay* has been its subjectivism and psychologism. On this point, I concur with Ekeh's conclusion that "[u]nlike psychologism, which does not distinguish truth from human consciousness but conflates them, Newman's approach is subjective and introspective, while preserving a clear distinction between perception of truth in phenomena and the object investigated. Newman clearly made the transcendental turn insofar as could highlight the subjective aspect of the human attainment of truth and not lose, confuse, or conflate the objective with the subjective conscious processes and states" (Ekeh 2008, p. 42). Newman may have even been a good psychologist, but his concern was philosophical truth. The childhood experience was important to him for its philosophical value and is introduced here as, in modern terms, a thought experiment; whilst also providing us with a remarkably phenomenological analysis of it.

Let us now explicate the four proposed features of conversion as it unfolds in the two, as I claim, related stories, beginning with familiarity. The *Apologia* story is very terse. However, Newman's first contention is highly interesting: "I fell under the influences of a definite Creed and received in my intellect impressions of dogma." The 'change of thought' refers to getting rid of his former impressions, as by then, he had already read Voltaire, Paine, and Hume. What happened was not at all extraordinary. Many adolescents routinely change their minds, as they are highly sensitive to various impressions, including, why not, "of dogma." Newman's closing remark is that the impressions of this conversion "through God's mercy, have never been effaced or obscured" (Ap p. 16). Thus, a change may 'become' fundamental only ex post facto, and most probably, it is a rare event that the subject is certain that what has just changed in his mind is somehow final. Recall that Newman's conversion involved the conviction that he was chosen for eternal glory, which, he adds dryly, faded away gradually. It would be easy to imagine a mainstream evangelical sequence to this change, with the conviction of belonging to the elected remaining strong but the intellectual belief in the 'dogma' becoming more volatile. However, this is not what happened. What happened instead were two strong convictions took root in Newman's



mind, but only one survived. Thus, first, whereas a “great change of thought” may indeed be experienced as great, such changes are, especially in early adolescent age, not at all exceptional, but on the contrary, quite common, especially among more bookish youngsters; second, not all such changes survive. On the contrary, certain influences or convictions *vanish*. Newman himself provides no further explanation of *losing his belief* in predestination (without losing his belief in God’s presence and benevolence). A possible explanation is just that the thought of having been elected for eternal glory must have been fundamentally alien to, or at odds with, his intellectual persuasion; in other words, not *at home with him*.

This is perhaps a bit of reading too much into a few sentences. The *Essay* story very much confirms the familiarity aspect of religious faith. There we are told about a *moral conversion* of a child. This makes the conservative or confirmative nature of such conversions more explicit, as metanoia is a decision to turn back and submit oneself to authority, once known to the subject but, in extreme cases, having lost contact with it. A psychological explanation would then perhaps argue that the familiarity-aspect is but a form of paternal influence and that conversions, including ones which involve a ‘great change of mind’, may be nothing but coming-home events, in an almost literal sense. However, such explanations are highly reductionist. Our identity evolves under the influence of various, often contradictory effects. Familiarity is just one, though surely prominent, feature of our way of connecting our new experiences with old ones and constituting our personal identity. Those who convert, or undergo conversion, may feel more at home after the experience, but conversions are not caused by one’s urgings to find a home. The spiritual world contains several habitats, most of them suitable for feeling at home in them, but conversions are evidence that our spiritual journey is about more than homely feelings and being at peace with one’s identity.

Why it would be grossly misleading to reduce to conversion experience to its familiarity-aspect is best seen if we consider the second and third features, which are the aspects of *discovery*, of becoming aware of some new *reality* conveyed by *conscience*, the peculiar meeting point of external moral authority and the very core of the self.<sup>6</sup> I take the liberty here to use a personal example to elucidate how the apprehension (Newman’s term) of a new reality, or better, a new sort of apprehension of the same reality, may take place. In the course of studying physics in primary school, we were demonstrated how gravitation works: the teacher let an iron ball drop on the floor. I saw, understood, and apprehended, not only notionally but also, I suppose, in a real sense (Newman’s terms), as gravitation is a very real law for every human being. In practically every movement of ours, we experience the Earth drawing us to itself. However, that is the point: the self-evidential nature of gravitation and its effects gravely impaired my full apprehension of it. I was singularly unimpressed by the ‘experiment’ or the demonstration. The full meaning of the demonstration and the tremendous importance of gravitation as one of the four basic forces of nature was brought home to me much later. My ‘conversion to physics,’ was both a return to an old ‘truth’ (I preserved a vivid memory of the demonstration exactly because I found it so silly at the age of 13) and, in a somewhat Newtonian fashion, a discovery of something new and even majestic.

The first conversion story of the *Apologia* does not refer to a discovery of a new, or a new piece of reality. Instead, Newman writes about a strange sense of material reality as such being less real than his own self and God. He begins by contending that he was very “superstitious” (*Ap* p. 14) before his conversion, and he relates this to childhood fantasies. Superstitious thinking, especially in adulthood, is often difficult to distinguish from proper ‘religious behavior’, such as insisting on certain traditions and habits without true faith, but Newman seems to have thought it important to recall these memories because of their lasting influence on his looking upon reality with suspicion. In what appears to be an honest, even bold admission, Newman directly relates these fantasy-experiences to his later conviction that material reality was uncertain, and there were “two and only two absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator” (*Ap* p. 16). Thus, instead of discovering a kind of new reality, Newman recalls how his *sensing* of reality took a distinct

direction. Discovery may consist of a new way of looking and apprehending: Newton did not discover gravitation but apprehended it in a completely new context.

Once again, a psychologist would confirm the importance of childhood fantasies for later religious faith. However, Newman's honesty precludes a hasty conclusion that his faith is *nothing but* a continuation of his early fantasies. What reality is, is one of the greatest questions of metaphysics, which cannot be answered by psychology. There are various ways of discovering the metaphysical dimensions of reality, much as there are moments when scientific discoveries open a new way of looking at the world. The early conversion story is an extraordinary account of understanding one's own existence bound up with the understanding of God's existence. This appears to entail the exclusion of experiencing anything within the realm of phenomena and precludes any meaningful phenomenological analysis. In fact, the sparsity of the details makes further speculations about the possibilities of such analyses difficult. However, this is where the *Essay* account turns out to be helpful once again.

Remember the child undergoing moral metanoia. Newman asserts that the hypothetical child discovers for himself the reality of God by way of introspection, within the aura of intimacy, and the complex emotional vector system of *conscience*: moral pain and moral pleasure, remorse and consolation, alienation and trust.<sup>7</sup> There are innumerable phenomenological treatises of consciousness, but it is difficult to find such ones of conscience. In a highly rudimentary fashion, I suggest that the *intentional content* of conscience, perhaps, the experience of operative and reflective conscience, is *morality* in the first place, which *presents* itself by *emotions* described by Newman, perhaps with a peculiar sort of pain being the most prominent one.<sup>8</sup> We *fear* not being able to act as our conscience commands, and fear is doubtlessly a form of pain; once we have indeed failed to do our duty, we feel remorse and guilt, another form of pain. Additionally, Newman refers to God being the Supreme Judge revealing Himself via our conscience.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, the extraordinary feature of conscience 'discovered' by Newman is the underlying positive dimension of morality and judgment, which is love and caring, forgiveness, and consolation. These emotions are perhaps less evidently presented to us, yet they are the vehicles of a more *real* presence, that of God. As Keaty observes, "the external world, like God, refers to no particular object and yet it is apprehended in a real manner" (Keaty 1996, p. 6). Evidently, let us add that, while it is our senses that help us apprehend the external world, it is our conscience and its emotions that assist us in discovering God and His all-encompassing goodness, flowing from creation onwards. The experience of goodness, against the indifference, even hostility, of nature, today so vividly described by various chilling cosmological scenarios about the end of the universe, is perhaps an even more compelling argument than it was earlier. Paul Moser has argued recently that "this goodness is unmatched by typical human goodness" as it is "more profound than what we humans typically offer as our moral goodness. It extends to love as redemptive care (for the good) not just for my friends and peers but also for my enemies" (Moser 2021, p. 430). We are free to resist and reject, not perhaps goodness as such but goodness being evidence of a person's presence. However, even those who do so cannot simply declare the experience of such goodness a psychological dependence (infantilism) or pure 'emotional fantasizing.'

The analogy between gravitation and morality may be a bit simplistic yet hopefully enlightening: the full meaning of gravitation is disclosed to us once we understand its universal nature; the full meaning of morality is revealed only if it is placed within the context of love. Since, however, love cannot be but a personal relationship, the solitary conscience experiencing love actually and realistically encounters God. It is true, of course, that in many cases of breaching moral rules, we are harming others, wherefore our conscience hurts us because we have hurt others, perhaps our beloved ones. We seek their forgiveness and wish to be reconciled with them. However, conscience operates on a vastly greater scale. Our conscience makes us conscious of our sinful nature, vile proclivities, hidden hatreds, and stiffened hearts; there is no one in this world to ask for forgiveness for such evils. Despair, cynicism, and hypocrisy, sins against the Holy Spirit, are among

the possibilities of reacting to painful conscience. Space does not permit me to dwell on this issue any longer, but the emerging point is hopefully clear: in Newman's analysis, conscience is an operative mode of our consciousness in which we are able to discover the loving dimension of morality, which no longer points a Supreme Judge but to a forgiving Father.

Additionally, this brings us to the fourth feature of conversion, which is intelligibility. As a matter of fact, if familiarity and conscientious decisions are indeed common features of conversions, we have strong pre-emptive reasons to think that conversion cannot be a wholly mysterious event. On the contrary, without proper discernment, preternatural experiences can be misleading and dangerous. Here, the *Essay* story is particularly illuminative. In the first place, the whole book is a philosophical enquiry into the process of accepting the truth, which Newman calls the act of giving real assent to it. Truly, in a nutshell, in Newman's account, we begin with apprehending things first notionally and then in a real sense; although absolute knowledge is for us impossible, we do have the means to achieve certitude by accumulating real knowledge and certitude so conceived obliges us as rational beings to begin our assent to the truth. To this, our conscience provides us with a moral sense of duty.

Some critics have maintained that Newman downplays the importance of 'notional assent,' implying that what matters is 'real assent,' which may be attained by an illiterate person hardly understanding anything of the theological terms the Church uses (cf. [D'Arcy 1931](#), pp. 102–5; [Newman 1974](#)). Theology matters, they contend, as fine distinctions can make all the difference, ultimately, between eternal salvation or damnation. It is necessary to express faith minimally in terms of consciously professing the creed. We may add that, indeed, a full examination of conscience in the Catholic tradition includes asking oneself about how intently and strongly one believes in the specific dogmatic truths taught by the Church. However, on the whole, I think such criticisms miss the point. It is true that Newman was fond of citing St Ambrose's dictum that he used as a motto for the *Essay*: "Non in dialectica complacuit Deo salvum facere populum suum [It did not please God to save His people by logic]." Additionally, it is also true that Newman was perhaps a bit too stark when he summed up his contrast between notional and real assent, grounded in two different modes of the working of the human mind: "Theology, properly and directly, deals with notional apprehension; religion with imaginative" (*Es* p. 82). Such contrasts are, however, both illuminating and blurring. Notwithstanding the alleged downplaying of the importance of notional apprehension, the whole *Essay* is meant to outline how philosophy helps the philosopher (and the theologian) to go along the path of conversion and never to lose sight of the light.

However, the *Essay*, despite its technical subtleties and sometimes forbidding terminology, contains vividly described experiences, such as the conversion of children. Newman stresses that the child, in the process of realizing the full weight of his offense, does not merely subject himself to judgment but also approves of moral law. This *act of approval* is parallel to the act of assent, but the child, being unable yet to apprehend the notions of conscience, morality, and even God, gives his approval of what is good and evil and thereby assents to truth in a real sense, though perhaps implicitly yet. Thus, perhaps inadvertently, Newman changes the direction of the process of apprehension. Additionally, this is more realistic, as our experiences of what is good and what is bad morally are certainly related to experiencing another person's pains and pleasures. The philosophical explanation is always and necessarily subservient to the ordinary explanation. Later in the *Essay*, Newman points out that even the most 'theology-specific' terms, namely, those of trinitology, are rooted in plain words: "Three, One, He, God, Father, Son, Spirit", which "have all a popular meaning" and "are among the simplest and most intelligible that are found in language" (*Es* p. 86). These notions are extremely rich and, therefore, complicated. Fatherhood is a formidably complex relational term, and the very concept of number implied in our simple counting operations grounds the whole edifice of mathematics. However, the point is that philosophy and science are merely different levels of making sense of ordinary experiences



of reality, or in the case of conversion, of a process of giving assent which goes both slowly and quickly.

### 5. Newman's Second Conversion

After graduation, Newman became an Anglican priest, with unceasing interest in the doctrine and, more importantly, the doctrinal 'position' of his Church. The story of the Oxford Movement, and of the Tracts, with innumerable articles, sermons, and letters, provide the intellectual and personal context for his development and eventual acceptance of the RCC as the only and true church. It was a long and often tormenting journey. Let me recall what appear to be the most dramatic moments on a path of personal development (Newman parses his *Apologia* into chapters according to periods of time as his "religious opinions" changed) that lasted decades. Apparently, it was in the summer of 1839 when his conception of Anglicanism as a *Via Media* (between Catholicism and Protestantism) collapsed. In the course of reading the story of the Monophysites, "for the first time a doubt came upon me of the tenableness of Anglicanism (...) by the end of August I was seriously alarmed. (...) I saw my face in that mirror and I was a Monophysite" (*Ap* 96). Somewhat later, he read a paper in which Augustine's words: "securus iudicat orbis terrarum [the world's judgment is certain]", were cited. A friend of his reminded Newman of these words, and eventually, he could no longer escape their effect. "For a mere sentence, the words of St. Augustine, struck me with a power which I never felt from any words before. (...) By those great words (...) the *Via Media* was absolutely pulverized." "I had seen the shadow of a hand upon the wall. (...) He who has seen a ghost, cannot be as if he had never seen it. The heavens had opened and closed again. (...)". However, he adds that "[m]y old conviction remained as before (*Ap* pp. 98–99)." Additionally, he then begins an arduous journey with "dismay and disgust" as a result of having been proven wrong (*Ap* p. 100). Newman then reports to have "determined to be guided not by [his] imagination, but by [his] reason" (*Ap* p. 100). Time will resolve, grace will help, and God must be trusted.

As far as the aspect of *familiarity* is concerned, we can safely say that his entire development was a conscious search for the true home or, if possible, to make his church more homely. For non-religious readers, the *Apologia* is probably interesting for reasons of style and perhaps biography-writing. They would have difficulties with appreciating the author's torments and ordeals, not mainly as a clergyman (institutional loyalty is, after all, an issue known to most people) but as a theologian. However, the dramatic words: "I saw my face in that mirror and I was a Monophysite", may strike them as authentic expressions of a strange and even scary experience of a person not being identical to himself. Here, the familiarity aspect is inseparably tied to the reality aspect. In a phenomenological sense, what takes place is a realization of the fact that one's identity is an identity *different* from what is supposed to be the case. This is not a new identity, however. On the contrary, Newman knew who the Monophysites were, they were very *familiar* to him; thus, what is new is not the identity itself but the realization of the collapse of an identity (the *Via Media*) he confessed by his heart (it melts down, or pulverizes, as Newman describes it). The strangeness of the event becomes apparent if we formulate it as a paradox: one may disown an identity and identify oneself with another one. This may suggest a frivolous changing of identities as if they were costumes hanging in the wardrobe while having an identity entails the practical impossibility of its abandoning *ad libitum*. Conversion experiences are important for phenomenology because they give a clue to how such impossible-looking Damascus-road changes may indeed occur not in spite of but for the very reason of being concerned with one's identity. Probably, such concerns are related to being right (living in truth) or wrong; to being sinful or justified (think of Luther's case); to belonging (to Christ, to Christianity, to the Church). Thus, conversions, either backward or forward, occur once one recognizes the *reality* of one's true identity: as a heretic, as a sinner, or as an outcast. By realizing this, the self may feel to have been cast into the void, into a non-position, as it were, from where it looks around in search of a new home. However, an experience of an absolute void is impossible. What happens is, rather, that unmasking one's false

identity is possible only if a new identity suggests itself as being the real one. In Newman's case, it was Monophysitism, albeit not in a theological sense but metaphorically, as a position in-between. Many of his followers and friends in the Oxford Movement continued finding Anglicanism as a *Via Media* an inhabitable or even comfortable position providing them with a meaningful identity. Newman, however, found it void, pointless (also in a literal sense); this, for him at least, was ultimately unreal. He was not only exasperated with his efforts to make his church homely but found it positively impossible to follow the path of so many Protestant church-founders who were busy constructing a home for themselves. His belief in the apostolic succession rendered any other solution but accepting the sole remaining possibility of moving in and, eventually, identifying himself as Catholic untenable.

Conversions affecting one's identity (unlike, for instance, conversions of the previous type, that is, assenting to truth or to God—although such conversions may also come along with a deep identity crisis) are often painful and agonizing experiences. Initially, at least, Newman was not at all happy with his new (i.e., no longer Monophysite but Catholic) identity. About these weeks, he reports experiences of being alarmed, of dismay, and disgust. Additionally, perhaps it is not exaggeration to add a feeling of humiliation for having been in the wrong; being ashamed for intellectual error (pride hurt at its heart); fear of having misled, if unwillingly, so many people; as he himself admits, the excruciating pain and anguish that liberalism, which he more or less identifies with religious indifferentism, proves right in the end, since if truth turns out to be elsewhere, why could it not lie in a completely different corner, if anywhere? It seems that when Charles Kingsley's attack on "Father Newman" and his church for condoning untruthfulness, if not outright lying, arrived, Newman did not react only because he wished to defend his integrity and the reputation of his church. He wanted to finish his conversion by writing the *Apologia* and eliminating the last remaining negative emotions. The book is a public confession rather than a report, a memoir, or, indeed, an apologia. It is a disclosure of a self that had to overcome strong negative emotions, and in this respect, the opposite of the first conversion, in which positive emotions were shown to lead the child to the discovery of love. However, perhaps on a deeper level, the feelings of finding a home are not that dissimilar to love. Trust, tranquility, and serenity heal anguish and pain; not, however, before the decision is made. The soul is cast into the night, the void, the impossible place, but the experience is connected to *being cast* and not to *being there*. The kindly light Newman saw in his soul leading him back to England in 1833 signifies the certainty of there being a greater home somewhere, and those who are not yet there may still belong to it. This is the experience of being invited, of being counted on, of being trusted before one can begin to trust.

The *Essay* does not discuss identity issues, and we have no thought experiment, as I claimed, most probably autobiographical, comparable to the one about the child assenting to the existence of God, which would highlight the hard journey to the true church. However, the *Essay* as such is also highly self-referential because it is a long discussion of Newman's personal discoveries concerning his mental life and history. He explicitly disowns any claims that he is trying to 'convert' anyone. He firmly holds that with the help of our conscience, we are capable of discovering God's existence and the precepts of natural religion. However, for the purpose of making his conversion to the RCC intelligible, he introduces another concept, that of the *illative sense*. Whereas conscience is a moral guide to God, the illative sense is a concept distilled from his experiences leading to Rome, and it is related to the operation of the mind: "It is the mind that reasons, and that controls our reasonings, not any technical apparatus of words and propositions. This power of judging and concluding, when in its perfection, I call the Illative Sense" (*Es* pp. 227–28). The illative sense is distinct from phronesis which is a faculty of controlling our behavior, and our aesthetical sense, which has an even more restricted scope of application. The illative sense is a faculty of reason by which we are capable of "using correctly principles of whatever kind, facts or doctrines, experiences or testimonies (. . . , and. . . ) discerning what conclusion from these is necessary, suitable or expedient" (*Es* p. 232). Improbable perhaps

as it appears on the first reading, Newman cites William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury: “when Laud said that he did not see his way to come to terms with the Holy See, ‘till Rome was other than she was’, no Catholic would admit the sentiment: but any Catholic may understand that this is just the judgment consistent with Laud’s actual condition of thought and cast of opinions, his ecclesiastical position, and the existing state of England” (*Es* p. 232). It is improbable because behind Laud’s mask, Newman himself appears to hide from his long and conflict-ridden journey. The illative sense, much like conscience, is subject to various influences, but unlike conscience, it has no natural (i.e., God-given) guide, that is, morality. However, for this very reason, it is more philosophical in nature, notwithstanding the importance of grace and heart, making conversion a fully intelligible process.

## 6. Kolnai’s Conversion

Aurel Kolnai’s conversion is a 20th-century story, with a new sort of Catholicism already emerging, less rigid philosophically, less clerical in its outlook, more innovative in many respects, and often deeply influenced by lay intellectuals. Kolnai himself owed a lot to G. K. Chesterton and his writings, who, much as Newman, was a relatively late ‘formal’ convert to the RCC but whose Catholic sympathies dragged a host of followers towards the Church well before his final step. Another serious factor in Kolnai’s conversion was the traumatic experience of the First World War and its aftermath, with the Bolshevik dictatorship in Hungary and the surrealism of politics during those months. Newman never experienced such turmoil and the fundamental earthquake of Western civilization. Finally, Kolnai was a Jew, coming from a typical liberal-minded, mostly nominally Jewish family with high moral standards and unconditional loyalty to the government. Kolnai writes with his characteristically charming, subtle ironic tone that “I am taught—with moderation—that God exists—discreetly—and a short evening prayer, and, of course, that I ought to be good. (...) God I shall deny—with my parents’ disapproval—from about my twelfth year, but my goodness (in the callow and inadequate sense of a primacy of moral emphasis) has endured” (*PM* p. 3). His memories of his childhood are remarkably similar to Newman’s: “My own vital tone as a child is a compound of solid security and estrangement from my home milieu, basic robustness and nervous vulnerability, fascination by a host of objects and brooding introversion” (*PM* p. 4).

The war brought about a strange condition of mind in Kolnai. It had two features. First, as an adolescent, he allied himself with the Entente. His main reason, as he discussed four decades later, was the belief in the moral rightness of the allied *cause* rather than in the moral superiority of either the English or the French or the moral inferiority of the Central Powers. Both sides had certain valid moral arguments, and neither was morally flawless. Seeing that the allied *cause* was morally right was neither obvious (say, to an impartial mind) nor unrelated to his personal psychology, and yet Kolnai argues persuasively that our great choices in life need and will inevitably have a strong moral aspect, the conviction that we are, after all, and all things considered, morally right in making our choice. The prominence or primacy of the ‘moral emphasis’ has remained one of the main tenets of Kolnai’s moral philosophy (Kolnai 1978a), pre-marking the strong moral aspects of his conversion.

The second feature is the strangeness he calls “double consciousness.” He introduces it in a fine phenomenological style which is worth quoting: “Man’s mental life is at the same time an unceasing process of integration, concentration, hardening and crystallizing out on the one hand, of tempering, mellowing, softening down on the other” (*PM* p. 25). Intelligent people constantly struggle with reconciling their mental contradictions, and even if they manage to integrate them on a higher level, there always remain elements resisting full integration. This, however, is apt to make such people more tolerant towards their own selves, as well as to the “fragmentary nature of life and its values” (*PM* p. 23). The first type of double consciousness was, Kolnai writes, his fantasy world opposing the ‘real’ one (something that arrested Newman as well), which developed into a more mature

duality of his becoming committed both to the allied cause internationally and to the left in domestic politics. The first was a morally justified one, but the second commitment was, he claims, illusory or erroneous. Much as Newman struggled with his double consciousness of being committed to apostolic succession (Catholicism broadly understood) and to the Anglican cause, trying to integrate the two in his conception of *Via Media*, Kolnai also tried as hard as he could to reconcile his moral thinking with what he later realized as the intrinsically utopian and profoundly amoral lure of leftism. As a matter of fact, in his mature political philosophy, Kolnai was able to integrate political left and right into a greater moral scheme (Kolnai 1960) but writing about these early years, he maintains that leftist thinking of the age was a form of secular religion, a faith in progress, deeply, but to him not conspicuously, at variance with his moral stance. Kolnai never succumbed to Bolshevism; on the contrary, its moral nature he instinctively discovered and detested, but he continued being a leftist thinker up until the 1940s, while already being a committed Catholic.

Thus, we come to Kolnai's own account of his conversion. It occupies two densely written chapters in the *Memoirs*, titled *In Statu Viae* and *Chesterton and Realism*. Kolnai's conversion consisted in his acceptance of the Christian faith and the RCC simultaneously: "I had taken an affirmative attitude to both God and the Catholic Church before I came to Christ or took any particular interest in the Gospel" (PM p. 92). Of course, this did not mean that he remained ignorant of these constitutive factors of the Christian faith (he chose 'Thomas' as his baptismal name, referring to both Aquinas and the Apostle first in doubt and then becoming the first Christian 'convert'). What I find truly remarkable is that Newman in the *Apologia* also makes almost no reference to Jesus (either directly or in the form of 'our Lord'),<sup>10</sup> being concerned with God and the Church almost exclusively: a feature Kolnai was similarly unconcerned with, but unlike Newman, aware of (making adequate reference to it). In what follows, I shall re-organize his account of conversion also by examining the four prominent features of familiarity, discovery (of some new or different reality), conscience, and intelligibility, adding to them the peculiar aspects of his pre-conversion life, namely, the primacy of the moral emphasis, the irreality of the world (which makes room for more free choices), as well as the experience of double consciousness.

Kolnai was very much aware of the double-directedness of conversion, namely, its backward and forward-looking identity-confirming and identity-shaping aspects. "Examine the character, the thoughts and the life of any convert in his pre-Christian epoch, and you will find the foiled, uninstructed or unbalanced Christian. (...) If some of his former convictions and practices have now disappeared, in other respects his personality will appear to have unfolded more freely and to be fulfilled" (PM p. 84). "Conversion means both a violent departure from self and a restatement and consummation of self" (PM p. 85). "All in all, my advance toward the Faith had about it a negative note of liberation and a positive one of homecoming; liberation from the idols of naturalist reductionism and of Progress from Naught, Chaos and Slime toward 'Man's Divinity'; homecoming into a restored universe of meanings, qualities and hierarchies" (PM p. 91). He adds that he felt his own conversion to Catholicism was a confirmation of the great Jewish tradition of accepting God as the Supreme Legislator and the fountain of morality. These experiences of *familiarity* make Kolnai's attitude similar to Newman's, whose own account of accepting God was strongly tied to the concept of moral authority derived from childhood experience.

What is interesting is that the second feature of conversion, the discovery of a new *reality*, was obtained in Kolnai's case in the form of realizing the indispensability of institutional religion as opposed to personal or subjectivist faith in God/Jesus Christ, the central motive in many Protestant conversions. Kolnai was, by any account of his friends, a highly eccentric and individualist person, and yet he was a fervent believer in objective reality and a lifelong enemy of all subjectivist ideologies and philosophies (hence, his opposition to Heidegger<sup>11</sup> and the existentialist version of phenomenology, as well as his admiration for Husserl and his last opus, *Experience and Judgment*).<sup>12</sup> His doctoral dissertation on

ethical value and reality was already a clear commitment to the cause of phenomenological analysis in the sense of, first, admitting the objectivity of values and, second, the realization of the multifaceted nature of values residing in the world and its objects. In other words, values are objective but do not subsist as platonic ideas. Rather, they reveal themselves always partially and in a constant crossfire of other values. Even more importantly, they always present themselves through the emotions they elicit in the subject (Norgaard 2004, pp. 314–17), who has, therefore, the majestic philosophical responsibility of learning about values through his experiences. The seduction of existentialism, the reduction of experiences to subjective impressions, is a great danger, and Kolnai seems to have seen the Church as the safeguard of objective reality, truths and values alike. However, he was increasingly hostile to official Thomism, as he thought it tended to betray the initial openness of Scholastic investigations and reduce philosophy to thinking in certain formulae being repeated endlessly (Kolnai 1978b, esp. pp. 36–40), and more appreciative of personalism, but always steering clear of subjectivism. In effect, his conversion was also a *philosophical conversion*, the discovery of the objectiveness of the world of values, of which he thought phenomenology is best suited to give account.

Kolnai's conversion was also a solution to the problem of double consciousness. Although after his baptism and reception to the Church he continued promoting a social democratic agenda, and the condition of being torn between Catholicism and leftist persisted, it seems that on the most fundamental level, by his conversion, he obtained the means by which he was then able to integrate what he deemed to be worthwhile from his leftist thinking into his emerging conservative thinking. This was, he argues (Kolnai 1960), that the best and indispensable part of leftist thinking remains the true meaning of equality as well as the commitment to perfectionalism (his term), in itself, a necessary part of moral life and progress. Unlike Newman, Kolnai did not 'need' to abandon a false identity, but like him, Kolnai did find in the RCC a solution to a grave identity problem, confirming that conversions can amount to discovering a new context in which one feels, finally, at home.

The supremacy of morality over man's life was constitutive for both Newman and Kolnai. Both were preoccupied with *conscience*. Newman already provided a fine account of how emotions are integrated into the operation of conscience. Kolnai's mature phenomenological thinking provided for a more nuanced conception of conscience. Remaining within the context of his conversion, he describes how the Catholic understanding of the conscience seemed to him superior to other conceptions. Puritan moralism and the undeniable laxism of many Catholics, often pervading entire cultures, would have made him more appreciative of Protestantism. However, the rich culture of moral heroism and the uncompromising theology of good works essential to salvation made him accept Catholic moral teaching easier. More to the point, he provides a singularly interesting account of the Gospel ethic, calling it more plain, down-to-earth, commonsensical, directly related to commands (what to do and what not to do), and yet complex, highly variegated, nuanced, and appreciative of individual concerns. What "pervades the air of the New Testament" is a "fearless freedom of eccentricity (...) mingled with a terse and almost homely savour of common sense" (PM p. 102). The reason why conscience is best cared for in a Catholic world is, as Kolnai argues, that its working is essentially a balancing, discerning, examining activity which presupposes both various standards, set by the Gospel, and an awareness of one's personal circumstances. These circumstances are, however, not merely 'hard' facts, in themselves devoid of moral meaning ('since I cannot swim, I cannot save the drowning guy') but include moral commitments ('as a doctor, I have special moral duties that others don't'), different valuations ('falsifying documents is prohibited but saving the life of the persecuted is morally imperative'), or distinct value responses ('mercy overcomes justice'). The objective moral world presents itself to the conscience in its full intentional reality, and doing justice to it requires an all-compassing moral authority that we do not possess and without whose assistance we are bound to fail. The Church provides us with this guidance, which is not an intrusion into one's conscience but, in the first place, enables it to articulate itself in its full scope. For Newman, conscience was a way to discover God. For Kolnai, it



was a way to discover the Church. Implausible as it may sound first, the Church is faithful to the ethic of the Gospel, a footprint, if we may say so, of the *Hound of Heaven* (Kolnai himself cites Francis Thompson's great poem), the highly sensitive phenomenologist realized not only a supreme and reliable safeguard of his own conscience but its creator and constant guide.

Finally, as far as the intelligibility feature of conversions is concerned, let me first note that Kolnai did not develop a full-scale rational account of explaining how certitude is formed and real assent is given, although he did use the notion of "an act of assent" (PM p. 89). However, whenever he immerses himself in recalling his impressions of experiences and the effects on his mental development, his style becomes essayistic. Many (albeit not all) of his scholarly publications were also close to this genre; thus, there is a continuity between his *Memoirs* and his phenomenological writings. After all, the main strength of phenomenology, as Kolnai understood it, was a fine-tuned description, but he preferred colorful metaphors to technical, often abstruse, terms, being aware that although metaphors are not meant to persuade anybody about truth, they certainly make the truth more intelligible.

In this vein, we can perhaps interpret his double consciousness as a flowing of grace parallel to one's mind in operation (for Newman, the working of the illative sense). Here, it is important to recall Kolnai's early experiences of estrangement, similar to those of Newman, which serve as preparations not for receiving but becoming aware of the reality of grace. A full immersion in the material world is arguably unhelpful in the conversion process because the person weakens her capacity to reflect on herself. Kolnai was especially grateful to phenomenology because it helped him maintain a complex mode of self-reflection. He contrasted this with psychoanalysis, a method he found very early (he himself visited the Vienna circle around Freud for some time) grievously dangerous because it was, in his view, both subjectivist and naturalist/deterministic at the same time, unable to provide a coherent picture of the psyche. In fact, Kolnai thought phenomenology was just the method of describing reality in its fullness, *including* the free will of the individual, with the implication that other non-natural influences, among which God's grace takes a prominent place, are admissible. It is in this sense that phenomenology proves to be an exceptionally viable preparatory phase towards religious conversions.

Kolnai's attitude to the classical way of 'proving' God's existence or the verity of the Church is, again, similar to Newman's. Neither was particularly impressed by the classical arguments, and both are more friendly toward the argument taken from consensus and common sense. *Securus iudicat orbis terrarum*: that was Newman's motto during his conversion to the RCC. Kolnai cites St Anselm, instead of Aquinas, for a similar reason: "It seems to me that St Anselm's succinct and much-derided 'proof' of the existence of God (...) really contains, in a most elegant if logically inadequate form, the gist of all other arguments for Theism: not the concept as such (...) but the fact that mankind has this concept testifies to the existence of God. (...) [For] the assumption that [our imagination] was able to create the fictitious concept of an altogether different and superior order of Being strikes us as preposterous" (PM p. 94). God emerges not as an object of experience but as the horizon of our experiences, not as a personal, but as a common horizon.

Related to the intelligibility of conversion, Chesterton's influence on Kolnai also deserves a few lines. His "wisdom and wit" caused Kolnai, in his early twenties, to conclude that "[n]ot to share Chesterton's faith is, after all, a thing of rank absurdity" (PM p. 109). The English convert was, in Kolnai's eyes, a "public-house phenomenologist" (PM p. 110). Chesterton's penchant for paradoxes was, for him, a way of expressing the complexity of the world in a straightforward manner and plain language. Religion no longer appeared to be irrational, arcane, or perhaps outlandish. On the contrary, rationalism and modernism looked increasingly shallow and cheap. Chesterton respected philosophy without worshipping it for a moment and advanced common sense without ever defining it. Kolnai writes that, in effect, "I seldom had the feeling of being 'convinced' by Chesterton: rather, I was overwhelmed by wonderment to find that he uttered in plain English my

own inchoate and shapeless but innermost thoughts" (PM p. 112). Chesterton had his shortcomings, and his political and economic views were themselves often questionable, Kolnai writes, but this kind of intellectual midwifery points to an oft-forgotten aspect of conversions, which Newman neglected in the *Essay* (though, oddly enough, documented in the *Apologia* at great lengths): that our minds are never solitary, and that the horizon of human understanding is always a shared one. Phenomenology has achieved great work in outlining the collective aspects of individual experiences; the point here is that the intelligibility of conversion is not an added feature, perhaps a curious or unexpected one, but woven into the very fabric of the process, making the conversion, however personal, at certain stages an intimate encounter between the soul and God, also a common human story of apprehending reality.

On a final note, reflecting on the intelligibility feature of conversion, Kolnai's rich style and method of description should be emphasized. The insight to have here is that the explanation, description, and analysis of conversions, perhaps thought to resist proper philosophical rendition, is by no means impossible or possible only in exclusivist, metaphorical, poetical, or mystical language, with the inarticulate voices of rapture forming the extreme version. Certain literary styles and forms of writing, expressionism, avant-garde, and perhaps Dadaism sitting on the remote pole, are, nonetheless, commonly accepted as intelligible, accessible, and philosophically (aesthetically) meaningful forms of communication (though, obviously, not to everyone's taste), *on the assumption* that there is a common emotional and dispositional background all humanity can share. However, on this account, conversions are not at all different. Conversion 'stories' are hardly less intelligible, not at all exceptional; arguably, more accessible to philosophically (and aesthetically) uneducated minds than, for instance, abstract paintings; they are usually 'told' in very plain terms, avoiding both (philosophically) technical and mystical language. It is simply not true that conversion withstands philosophical scrutiny any stronger than, say, questions regarding the beginning (what was 'before' the Big Bang) and the possible ends of the universe bring us beyond the scope of intelligible cosmology, or questions about the 'meaning' of the concept of life or of evolution take us beyond biology as a natural science. It is certainly true that phenomenological discussions can also be forbidden, especially if they are carried out within the existentialist tradition, but if conducted in a humbler tone, without neglecting the great potential of metaphors and images, as did Kolnai, they are particularly apt to provide an intelligible account of conversion.

## 7. Conclusions

In this paper, I used John Henry Newman's and Aurel Kolnai's accounts of their respective (religious) conversions to provide an idea of how phenomenology can be applied to conceptualize the experience of conversion. At first sight, conversions may appear to be incommunicably subjective–personal events. However, in the course of history, they have been considered common experiences, open to uneducated minds as well as philosophers. Nonetheless, providing a proper account of them is well-served by philosophical reflection. As they are indeed subjective events in the first place, phenomenological analytical tools have a particularly strong potential to explore them. Though Newman was not an academic philosopher (and he was born before the phenomenological movement), his *Apologia* and *Grammar of Assent*, read jointly, provide us with a strikingly well-developed account of how conversions are best explained. Based on his childhood experience of God's existence and on his crisis of identity (Anglican–Monophysite–Catholic), I distinguished between four aspects of conversion: familiarity (homecoming), discovery (a new reality, a new identity), the prominence of conscience (moral certainty), and intelligibility (communicability). Aurel Kolnai, who was himself a committed realist phenomenologist, provided an autobiographical account of his conversion, using his characteristically phenomenological method of making fine-tuned distinctions in describing his experiences. As it turned out, without reading them into his conversion to the RCC, the same constitutive aspects revealed

themselves as in Newman's case (actually, cases). Hence, I conclude that other conversion experiences may be studied fruitfully by applying these aspects.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In a voluminous treatise on Newman's conversion(s), R. C. Christie (2022) proposes a definition of conversion which extends its scope well beyond a particular experience and potentially involves the whole life of an individual. Accordingly, the definition is broken down into "twenty essential dimensions of the conversion experience" (p. 40). These are then grouped into categories of source, elements, process, functions, and effects. Christie is certainly right in pointing out the embeddedness of conversions in the subject's personal history, but whereas he also emphasizes the experience mode of conversion, which suggests a more limited scale of time, the book is, in effect, a biography of Newman, told in terms of these dimensions. It is, of course, possible to interpret a person's spiritual, moral, intellectual, and religious journey as a single process of conversion, and prophetic admonitions to 'convert' abound in the Jewish-Christian tradition, but they are about 're-conversion' to be practiced on a daily basis (see below). In any case, what is philosophically and phenomenologically interesting about conversion is surely a more limited, though often dramatic, experience. Additionally, despite his reluctance to dramatize the development of his 'religious views,' Newman did have such experiences at least twice ((Dulles 1997) stresses the long *durée* of Newman's conversion but points out the importance of a 'great act': p. 23). Without going into further detail, I propose to stick to the notion of 'experience' rather than a 'process' (potentially encompassing many years) or an 'act' (perhaps of the 'will,' often sudden), not only because it is more consistent with the vocabulary of phenomenology, but because it is supported by the commonsensical frame of timing: neither too short, nor too long, but sufficiently wide to include most, if not all, conversions.
- <sup>2</sup> A seminal contrast between László Tengelyi's (2003) concept of fate events and conversion could be drawn. It seems to me that Tengelyi's idea of fate events in a person's life narrative is essentially related to his or her identity is correct, and he is right in pointing out that facing such events, we are forced to reflect on how to reconcile conflicting meanings of our life. Conversions are certainly similar events; however, in Tengelyi's description, they would appear to be absolutely unpredictable, truly fate-like events, whereas, in most conversions, we find a homecoming or familiarity aspect that such events seem to lack.
- <sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, later in the *Apologia*, in the context of his conversion to the RCC, we find Newman to repeat that "I hold this still: (...) if I am asked why I believe in God, I answer that it is because I believe in myself, for I feel it impossible to believe in my existence (...) without believing also in the existence of Him, who lives as a Personal, All-seeing, All-judging Being in my conscience" (p. 156).
- <sup>4</sup> Dulles (1997), however, does note this fact (p. 24).
- <sup>5</sup> It is, thus, not how God's existence is *proven*. See Keaty (1996).
- <sup>6</sup> Ford (2014) appears to overemphasize the familiarity aspect by stressing the gradual, cumulative and discerning (illative) nature of Newman's conversions (plural). First, Newman was reluctant to use the word 'conversion' and stuck to an account of his 'religious views' developing (in fact, it does seem to me frivolous to apply this heavy concept to each milestone on his, or anyone else's, religious journey). Second, Ford ignores the memory and experience of a 'sudden change.' Instead, he writes about 'defining moments', but the concept is vague and does not capture the experience of realizing something new.
- <sup>7</sup> Holder (2016) proposes respect as the positive emotion attached to conscience in Kantian ethics. To me, it seems that respect is an attitude rather than an emotion, although it may be related to emotions such as caring or even a sort of joy. However, that does not make respect a preeminent feature of conscientiousness (Kant's error), and most certainly, Newman is phenomenologically more accurate in analyzing the operation of conscience, and he opens it up towards love.
- <sup>8</sup> This is, of course, very rough. McKeever (2023) has recently advanced the view that conscience is a form of consciousness, and he also argues that morality is presented to us in the form of responsive emotions (Peter Strawson's conception of reactive attitudes also comes to one's mind, but discussing the relationship between the two conceptions is beyond the objectives of this paper). His conception is also very briefly explained, and his central example restricts the scope of his argument to the direct moral operation of conscience (prompting action). Newman's example is much more nuanced and opens metaphysical perspectives.
- <sup>9</sup> For a good summary of Newman's views of conscience, citing further works, the *Letter to Norfolk* and the novel *Callista*, see Conn (2009).
- <sup>10</sup> Less than ten within the entire text, and distracting repeated locutions, perhaps not even six.
- <sup>11</sup> See Kolnai (2013) for several critical essays on the abuse of phenomenological concepts in Heidegger's and other proto-Nazi thinkers.

- <sup>12</sup> He praises the book for its novel concepts he finds extremely illuminating. He thought that phenomenology and analytical philosophy, which he came to admire, have a huge philosophical potential: “Husserl’s ‘horizon’ of the object and ‘perspective’ of the mind and the ‘context’ of the linguistic analysis come very close to one another.” Kolnai writes to have taken much inspiration from these ideas in his critique of utopian thinking and his conception of the philosophy of conservatism. It is here where he adds, significantly, that he also found Newman’s *Apologia* and *Essay* pointing in similar directions and appreciates Newman’s concept of the illative sense (*PM* p. 223).

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