

John Henry Newman, Truth, and University Education in an Age of AI

Tuan Viet Cao, C.M.

MA Philosophy candidate, DOMUNI Universitas

josephcaovietuan@gmail.com

Abstract

*This article argues that John Henry Newman remains a searching interlocutor for contemporary university education when he is read critically rather than nostalgically. It offers a Newmanian intervention in the philosophy of university education, with selective engagement in contemporary higher-education theory and public-reason debates rather than a full theology of the university. Through close reading of *The Idea of a University*, and at key points *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, it reconstructs four claims: a university presupposes the intelligibility of one reality under many aspects; truth is the norm of inquiry; liberal education forms judgment rather than merely distributing information; and theology can function within the university as a disciplined inquiry into ultimate questions. It then tests these claims against marketisation, AI-mediated learning, vocational reductionism, and procedural neutrality. Newman does not supply a nineteenth-century model ready for restoration. His social assumptions, institutional scale, and confessional setting require qualification, yet his deeper distinctions remain portable. They expose the reduction of education to measurable output, the confusion of fluent performance with understanding, and the temptation to treat pluralism as the suspension of truth. Newman's continuing importance lies in his insistence that university education concerns the formation of persons capable of responsible assent, proportionate judgment, and reality-oriented inquiry.*

Keywords: Newman, Truth, AI, Education

Universities are increasingly required to justify themselves in external and measurable terms. Their worth is cast in rankings, salaries, student satisfaction, research income, impact metrics, and labour-market value.¹ Generative AI intensifies an older confusion by making polished language easier to produce while leaving understanding uncertain. Across contemporary higher-education theory, the anxiety is therefore not only managerial but conceptual: the university risks forgetting what kind of institution it is, and losing its integrity as “institution of truth.”²

This article addresses that problem primarily as a contribution to Newman studies and the philosophy of university education, drawing on contemporary higher-education theory only where it clarifies present conditions. It does not attempt a full theology of the university or a comprehensive survey of current university theory. Its claim is narrower: Newman still offers distinctions by which present confusions about truth, inquiry, judgment, and the scope of academic reason can be seen more clearly. That claim persuades only if Newman is read textually

¹ Readings, B., *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 5, 21-24; Collini, S., *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012), 1-11; Barnett, R., *Imagining the University* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1-5; Biesta, G. J. J., *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2016), 11-12.

² Rider, S., “Truth, Democracy and the Mission of the University,” in *The Thinking University: A Philosophical Examination of Thought and Higher Education*, ed. Bengtson, S. S. E. and Barnett, R., (Cham: Springer, 2018), 25; Bengtson, S. S. E., Robinson, S., and Shumar, W., “Introduction - The University Becoming,” in *The University Becoming: Perspectives from Philosophy and Social Theory*, ed. Bengtson, S. S. E., Robinson, S., and Shumar, W., (Cham: Springer, 2021), 2-3.

and historically. *The Idea of a University*³ emerged from the attempt to found a Catholic university in Dublin amid disputes about liberal education, denominational identity, and theology's place in modern intellectual life.⁴ Newman neither wrote for a mass university system nor anticipated late-modern managerial governance, democratic access, deep pluralism, and digital mediation. Yet he asked with unusual sharpness what a university is for, what kind of intellectual formation it seeks, and what follows when one mode of knowledge quietly claims to measure the whole.

The argument proceeds in two movements. It first reconstructs Newman's account of the unity of knowledge, truth as the norm of inquiry, liberal education as the formation of a "philosophical habit," and theology's place within the circle of sciences. It then tests those claims against marketisation, AI-saturated learning, vocational reductionism, and secular neutrality. The point is not that Newman settles these debates, but that he provides a grammar for speaking, living, and judging truth within university education.

Reconstructing Newman

Historically Situated, Intellectually Portable

Any persuasive retrieval of Newman must begin with a concession. *The Idea of a University* is not a timeless treatise floating above history. It belongs to a distinct nineteenth-century setting shaped by post-Enlightenment disputes about reason and religion, increasing disciplinary specialisation, and Catholic efforts to imagine a university that could be intellectually serious without capitulating either to sectarian defensiveness or to reductive secularism.⁵ That setting imposes real limits. Newman's educational idiom often carries assumptions about class, gender, and culture that cannot simply be transposed into contemporary democratic institutions. His university is not the late-modern research university with its bureau-

cratic apparatus, mixed public-private accountabilities, mass enrolment, and digital infrastructures. Nor can his defence of theology be detached from the Catholic intellectual project within which it was made.

Yet Newman should not be treated as a museum piece. His principles remain portable where they are most formal and least antiquarian: in his non-reductive account of disciplinary plurality, his insistence that inquiry is answerable to truth, his distinction between education and mere training, and his refusal to let successful methods harden into metaphysical monopolies. Read this way, Newman is not a blueprint for restoring a lost university but a critic of recurrent temptations: fragmentation without relation, utility without orientation, and a procedural neutrality that narrows reason while claiming to protect it.

Universal Knowledge, Truth, and the Philosophical Habit

Newman's point of departure is famous, but often flattened into a slogan. A university, he writes, is "a place of teaching universal knowledge."⁶ Read crudely, this can suggest encyclopaedism, as if the university existed to accumulate everything or to produce students who know a little about everything. Newman's argument moves elsewhere. "Universal" does not mean exhaustive possession. It means relation, scope, and proportion. The sciences form a "circle" because the real is one, while inquiry approaches it under many aspects.⁷

His criticism of exclusion and reduction follows directly. Once a discipline forgets that it has abstracted one aspect of reality for a specific purpose, it can begin to treat its own method as exhaustive. Newman's example of political economy is telling: the problem is not that the economist studies wealth, but that the science of wealth may begin to speak as if it could decide what is finally worth pursuing.⁸ At that point, a method becomes a

³ In this paper, all references to *The Idea of a University* are to Newman, J. H., *The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated*, 3rd ed. (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1873). Many scholars also cite the posthumous Longmans "New Impression": Newman, J. H., *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1891). For contemporary scholarly purposes, the principal critical edition remains Newman, J. H., *The Idea of a University*, ed. Ker, I. T., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). The Notre Dame edition, with introduction by Svaglic, M. J., is likewise valuable for its editorial materials: Newman, J. H., *The Idea of a University*, ed. Svaglic, M. J., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982). A further useful edition, especially for teaching and modern interpretation, is Newman, J. H., *The Idea of a University*, ed. Turner, F. M., (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

⁴ Ker, I., *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 376-77; Turner, F. M., *John Henry Newman: The Challenge to Evangelical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 3-4.

⁵ Newman, *Idea of a University*, 181-182.

⁶ Newman, *Idea of a University*, ix, 20-21.

⁷ Newman, *Idea of a University*, 45-47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 87-89.

worldview. Newman's target is therefore not specialisation as such, but disproportion.

The educational fruit of resisting disproportion is what Newman calls the "philosophical habit." In one of the defining passages of *The Idea*, liberal education forms "a habit of mind" marked by "freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom."⁹ Elsewhere he describes true "enlargement of mind" as "the power of viewing many things at once as one whole," placing each in due relation within "the universal system."¹⁰ These formulations matter because they show that liberal education is not decorative breadth or genteel polish. It is intellectual formation in proportion. The educated person does not merely possess more information, but judges bearings, limits, and relative weight more adequately.

This is also why Newman's appeal to truth is more than pious ornament. He writes that intellectual cultivation secures "the sight of things as they are, or of truth, in opposition to fancy, opinion, and theory."¹¹ Truth here is neither infallible possession nor ideological certainty. It names the object to which inquiry is answerable. A university ordered to truth does not pretend to stand above history or conflict. It claims only that knowledge is measured by reality rather than by usefulness, preference, or rhetorical success. That is why the university remains a place of judgment rather than a machinery of credential distribution.

Contemporary suspicion toward universality is justified at one level. Too often the "universal" has concealed a privileged standpoint while pretending to speak from nowhere. Newman cannot be defended by ignoring that history. The better reading is chastened rather than triumphant. His universality is best read not as a finished totality but as a protest against fragmentation. Without some orientation toward relation, disciplinary plurality collapses into parallel monologues.

Theology and the Circle of Sciences

Newman's most controversial claim follows from the foregoing. If the university professes universal knowledge, and if theology concerns real truth-claims about God, the world, and human destiny, then theology's exclusion

deforms the university's intellectual architecture. His syllogism is blunt: a university professes to teach universal knowledge; theology is "a branch of knowledge." Therefore, a university that excludes theology either denies that theology is knowledge or ceases to be what it claims.¹²

What matters is not only the conclusion but the form of the argument. Newman is not merely asking that religion be granted cultural respectability. He is making an epistemic claim. Theology matters because questions of origin, end, moral order, and relation to God are not dissolved by empirical success elsewhere. Excluding theology tends instead to produce a vacuum into which other disciplines expand beyond their competence. Newman's warning about a science being made "the centre of all truth" is therefore not anti-scientific complaint but a caution against explanatory imperialism.¹³

For that reason, theology's role in the university is not negative but positively enlarges the university's field of vision. It keeps open questions that empirical and technical disciplines frequently presuppose but cannot settle: whether reality is intelligible as more than mechanism, whether human agency is reducible to function, whether moral obligation is merely constructed, and whether final ends can be treated as intellectually serious objects of reflection. Theology does not compete with chemistry, economics, or sociology on their own terrain. It asks what account of the whole is being implied when those disciplines move from method to metaphysics.

Still, Newman is persuasive only if an essential distinction is maintained. Theology as a university discipline is not identical with confessional control. A university need not require religious adherence in order to host theology as a public discipline. Theology becomes academic precisely by being arguable, criticisable, historically responsible, and answerable to standards of reasoning and evidence. Newman's claim is thus sharper than either confessional dominance or secular exclusion: theology belongs in the university not because criticism must stop, but because ultimate questions are too important to be ruled inadmissible in advance.¹⁴ Here selective engagement with contemporary interlocutors clarifies rather than displaces Newman. Liberal accounts of public reason rightly resist coercion and confessional privilege within shared institu-

⁹ Ibid., 101-2.

¹⁰ Ibid., 137.

¹¹ Ibid., 180.

¹² Ibid., 20-22.

¹³ Ibid., 72-74, 89; Newman, J. H., *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 344.

¹⁴ Newman, *Idea of a University*, 54, 61.

tions.¹⁵ Yet it does not follow that theological reasoning must be excluded from a university curriculum. As Ford and van den Brink argue in different ways, theology can function publicly within the modern university when it is treated as a disciplined inquiry rather than a protected enclave.¹⁶ Newman's contribution is not to defeat pluralism but to deepen it. A plural university need not suspend questions of truth; it must learn to stage their contestation without coercion.

Newman and the Contemporary University

Marketisation, Audit, and the Eclipse of Ends

Newman is often invoked against marketisation, but the force of his criticism is not nostalgia for a pre-modern academy. It is conceptual. Readings famously diagnosed the contemporary university's reliance on the empty prestige term "excellence," while Barnett and Biesta, in different registers, insist that educational institutions cannot evade prior questions of purpose.¹⁷ Newman sharpens this criticism by showing why instrumental narrowing is not merely regrettable but deformative.

If the university loses sight of truth as the norm of inquiry, it may still describe outputs, efficiencies, and measurable impacts. What it cannot explain is why these matter, how they are ordered, or what kind of persons and judgments they should serve.¹⁸ Metrics are not false because they are measurable; they become distorting when they displace rather than serve the university's ends. Newman's language of relation and proportion is useful here. Practical goods become destructive when they are detached from a wider account of knowledge, reality, and judgment.

In this respect, Newman remains an uneasy ally of critiques of audit culture. He does not license a romantic disdain for practical accountability. Order, standards, ex-

aminations, accreditation, and demonstrable competence are legitimate and necessary elements of university life. A university must be responsibly governed, publicly answerable, and able to show that its work is substantive. Yet Newman denies that such mechanisms are sufficient or ultimate. Universities may serve labour markets, professions, and economic life, but when these functions become definitive, they hollow out the deeper formation that alone makes such service humane and enduring.

Generative AI, Epistemic Outsourcing, and the Judgment of the Learner

The age of generative AI makes Newman's emphasis on judgment newly urgent. Recent literature on AI in higher education repeatedly warns that the issue is not only cheating in a narrow procedural sense. Generative systems alter the conditions under which students write, reason, and present knowledge.¹⁹ The deepest danger is not simply false authorship, but the growing plausibility of fluent work detached from understanding.

Here *The Idea of a University* should be read together with *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. In the latter, Newman insists that "it is the mind that reasons, and that controls its own reasonings," and he names the perfected power of judging and concluding the "Illative Sense."²⁰ This does not signify a vague intuition or an irrational leap. Rather, it names the mind's trained capacity to discern when multiple probabilities, each insufficient on its own, converge with enough coherence and cumulative force to justify assent and yield certitude in concrete matters. Where probabilities genuinely diverge, however, certitude is not yet warranted. In such cases, judgment must test whether the contrary considerations can be integrated, outweighed, or shown to be only apparent difficulties rather than true counter-evidence.²¹ The point is highly relevant to AI-mediated learning because it identifies

¹⁵ Rawls, J., *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 5-7, 212-54.

¹⁶ Ford, D. F., "The Future of Theology at a Public University," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): a1807; van den Brink, G., "The Future of Theology at Public Universities," *In die Skriflig* 54, no. 2 (2020): 1-9.

¹⁷ Readings, *University in Ruins*, 21-24; Barnett, *Imagining the University*, 1-3; Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*, 33-47.

¹⁸ Bengtson, Robinson, and Shumar, "Introduction - The University Becoming," 3.

¹⁹ Bearman, M., Ryan, J., and Ajjawi, R., "Discourses of Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education: A Critical Literature Review," *Higher Education* 86 (2023): 369-85; Lindebaum, D., et al., "The Transformation of Epistemic Agency and Governance in Higher Education through Large Language Models: Toward a Future of Organized Immaturity," *Organization Studies* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406251392002>.

²⁰ Newman, J. H., *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Burns, Oates, and Co., 1874), 353-54.

²¹ Newman compares the illative sense to Aristotle's *phronēsis* as an acquired habit of right judgment in concrete matters, while also qualifying the analogy: neither is a merely formal method, and both are exercised in particular domains rather than as one abstract, universally uniform faculty. Thus the illative sense names not a rule-bound technique of inference, but a cultivated personal capacity for sound judgment. See Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 353-56.

judgment as a personal act rather than a formal manipulation of propositions. Reasoning, in concrete matters, does not consist in producing correct-looking discourse but in weighing, integrating, and assenting responsibly.

This distinction clarifies three AI-related problems. First, large language models produce simulated understanding. They generate persuasive prose without personal apprehension, struggle, or responsibility for truth. Second, they encourage epistemic outsourcing. Automation research long ago showed how readily humans over-trust systems that reduce effort and cognitive load; in education this becomes the temptation to accept summaries, explanations, and arguments because they are fast, coherent, and stylistically confident.²² Third, they destabilise assessment. Detection is unreliable, and traditional take-home prose can no longer serve as a stable proxy for understanding.²³

Newman does not offer a policy manual, but he does offer a criterion: assessment should make judgment visible. That is why current work on assessment redesign is more promising than fantasies of perfect detection. Corbin and colleagues, together with assessment reform work convened for the Australian sector, stress staged tasks, oral defence, supervised checkpoints, explanation of process, and visible decision-making.²⁴ These are not merely tactical responses to cheating. They restore what Newman would recognise as the learner's owned act of judgment. His relevance to AI is therefore not antiquarian. He helps identify what education must preserve when language can be manufactured at scale.

Vocationalism and the Difference Between Formation and Training

Universities are also pressed to justify themselves in vocational terms. Students face real economic pressure, institutions must demonstrate employability, and employers seek adaptable graduates for unstable labour markets. Newman is sometimes caricatured as indifferent to such realities. That is inaccurate. His distinction is not between useful and useless education, but between formation and reduction.

One of the most important passages in *The Idea* makes this explicit. Knowledge, Newman says, is not merely “an extrinsic or accidental advantage” that one can borrow, carry about, and exchange; it is “an acquired illumination,” “a habit,” and “a personal possession.”²⁵ The contrast is not between thinking and doing, but between education that transforms the mind and training that remains external to it. Newman can therefore acknowledge that trades, techniques, and professional skills have their place while still arguing that they do not by themselves amount to university education.²⁶

Contemporary evidence makes his point more rather than less plausible. The World Economic Forum's latest labour-market analysis stresses rapid skill disruption and the need for adaptability rather than narrow once-for-all competence.²⁷ Research on employability likewise suggests that initiative, judgment, creativity, and intellectual flexibility matter alongside immediate technical preparation.²⁸ Newman's realism lies here: universities serve practical life best when they refuse to become instruments of short-term utility. They prepare students for work by forming powers that travel across roles and across time.

²² Parasuraman, R., and Riley, V., “Humans and Automation: Use, Misuse, Disuse, Abuse,” *Human Factors* 39, no. 2 (1997): 230-53; Johnston, H., et al., “Student Perspectives on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence Technologies in Higher Education,” *International Journal for Educational Integrity* 20 (2024): 2; Gruenhagen, J. H., et al., “The Rapid Rise of Generative AI and Its Implications for Academic Integrity: Students' Perceptions and Use of Chatbots for Assistance with Assessments,” *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* 6 (2024): 100273.

²³ Fleckenstein, J., et al., “Do Teachers Spot AI? Evaluating the Detectability of AI-Generated Texts among Student Essays,” *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* 6 (2024): 100209; Corbin, T., et al., “On the Essay in a Time of GenAI,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 58, no. 3 (2026): 198-210.

²⁴ Corbin, T., et al., “The Wicked Problem of AI and Assessment,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* (2025): 1-17; Lodge, J., et al., *Assessment Reform for the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (Australia: Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2023).

²⁵ Newman, *Idea of a University*, 113.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 113-14, 121.

²⁷ World Economic Forum, *Future of Jobs Report 2025* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2025).

²⁸ Hooley, T. J., Bennett, D., and Knight, E. B., “Rationalities That Underpin Employability Provision in Higher Education across Eight Countries,” *Higher Education* 86, no. 5 (2023): 1003-23; Kovačević, M., Dekker, T., and van der Velden, R., “Employability Development in Undergraduate Programmes: How Different Is Liberal Arts Education?” *Teaching in Higher Education* 29, no. 8 (2024): 2184-2204.

Neutrality, Pluralism, and Final Ends

A final pressure concerns secular neutrality. Procedural neutrality has genuine value insofar as it protects institutions from coercion and confessional capture. Yet when neutrality hardens into an incapacity to speak about truth, the good, or final ends, it ceases to protect plural inquiry and begins to thin it. The university becomes articulate about methods and management while embarrassed by the question of what education is for. Newman helps expose the false comfort of that arrangement. His point is not that universities should become confessional, but that pluralism becomes intellectually superficial when ultimate questions are treated as administratively inconvenient.²⁹ Institutional non-establishment need not imply curricular abstinence about ultimacy. A university may remain public and plural while still allowing philosophy, theology, and related disciplines to argue about truth, human ends, and the shape of a life well lived.

That point matters for the present issue's concern with speaking, living, and judging the truth. Universities do not judge truth only by issuing propositions. They judge it in the range of questions they permit, the disciplines they legitimise, the forms of reasoning they reward, and the habits of attention they cultivate. A university that excludes ultimate questions in advance has already made a substantive judgment about reality while claiming merely to keep the peace. Newman's lasting contribution is to show that a more serious pluralism is possible: one that accepts contestation without reducing truth to private preference.

Conclusion

Newman's educational thought remains valuable not as a nineteenth-century programme to be restored, but as a set of distinctions capable of disciplining contemporary debate. Close reading of *The Idea of a University* shows that "universal knowledge" does not imply encyclopaedic mastery, but a rightly ordered apprehension of relations and proportions; that truth is not an ideological possession, but the norm to which inquiry remains answerable; that liberal education forms a philosophical habit of mind capable of judgment; and that theology, rightly understood, enlarges rather than constricts the university's intellectual horizon. These distinctions are not antiquarian. They remain practically consequential for diagnosing the deformities of the contemporary university.

In Newman's sense, this paper has argued that, within the present crisis of higher education, what is most at risk is not simply curricular balance or institutional ethos, but the very labour of intellectual formation: the cultivation of judgment, the ordering of knowledge to truth, and the education of persons capable of responsible assent. By the same cumulative reasoning, it has also shown that Newman's account continues to illuminate the path of remedy. His thought makes clear why the university must resist being reduced to employability, information delivery, or procedural accountability alone, while still assigning to practical preparation, public responsibility, and institutional discipline their proper and necessary place.

Newman's enduring contribution, then, is not nostalgia but judgment. He reminds us that university education concerns the formation of persons capable of proportionate reasoning, responsible assent, and reality-oriented inquiry. In an age tempted to mistake fluency for understanding, measurement for meaning, and management for wisdom, Newman's educational philosophy still identifies the university's task with unusual precision: *Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*.³⁰

²⁹ Newman, *Idea of a University*, pp. 28, 61, 69–70.

³⁰ The motto on his grave, means: "Out of shadows and images into the truth."

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