

# Knowledge and Existence

— Coleridge as a Philosopher in his Essays on Method —

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## **Preface: Method and Mind**

Any system of philosophy must include a critical reflection on the ground of the system itself, if it claims the name of philosophy. It must be asked how man as a finite being can define himself and know his position in nature and the infinite universe to construct a system.

Coleridge's solution of such basic philosophical questions as knowledge and existence could best be understood in the framework of Leibnitz's idea of expression placed in the neo-Platonic cosmology of universal intelligence. Coleridge seems to think of this universe as a system of intelligence which expresses itself as a creative process with life as its power and with symbols as its means. In this system life is the power of expression in the mind and in nature. The power of life discloses itself as a principle of and tendency to individuation (unity in the many) in degrees according to its intensity. It realizes its highest degree in man as self-consciousness where imagination as the living power expresses by producing symbols

the essence of the supreme intelligence as “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM”.<sup>1)</sup> In this creative act of imagination, man’s knowledge and his existence are united.

Now the question to be asked is what Coleridge thinks such cosmological construction is grounded on. What makes it possible for one to consider intelligence as a universal system, and life as a universal power, of expression? If it is possible for an individual human mind to tell something about the universal, there must be a certain mediatory power working in the mind itself. In Coleridge’s cosmological system imagination is defined as this power. Then this definition itself must be based on the working of the power of imagination, and the mediatory nature of imagination must be considered in the process of its working. So the question must be centred on how the individual mind can be mediated into the speculation of the universal.

In his essays on method, Coleridge gives various considerations to the nature of the creative activities of the mind in knowledge and existence.<sup>2)</sup> Quoting from Shakespeare’s works, he talks about the mind working methodically:

It is Shakspeare’s peculiar excellence, that throughout the whole of his splendid picture gallery . . . , we find individuality every where, mere portrait no where. In all his various characters, we still feel ourselves communing with the same human nature, which is every where present as the vegetable sap in the branches, sprays, leaves, buds, blossoms, and fruits, their shapes, tastes, and odours. Speaking of the effect, i.e. his works themselves, we may define the excellence of *their* method as consisting in that just proportion, that union and interpenetration of the universal and the particular, which must ever pervade all works of decided genius and true science.

(*Collected Works* 4, I, p. 457)

To work methodically the mind must be able to mediate between the universal and the particular, as is shown by Shakespeare in his expression of “the same human nature” in each individual character. And here Coleridge directs his considerations to the process of methodical thinking, saying “Method implies a *progressive transition*, and it is the meaning of the word in the original language. . . . But as, without continuous transition, there can be no Method, so without a pre-conception there can be no transition with continuity.”<sup>3)</sup> This pre-conception Coleridge calls *the leading thought* which must be the guiding principle of progression, and which, he thinks, may also be called “the INITIATIVE”.<sup>4)</sup>

To realize this progressive transition guided by the leading thought and so to mediate between the particular and the universal, the mind must start from the considerations of relations, and therefore liberate itself from the commitment to the particulars.

Method, therefore, becomes natural to the mind which has been accustomed to contemplate not *things* only, or for their own sake alone, but likewise and chiefly the *relations* of things, either their relations to each other, or to the observer, or to the state and apprehension of the hearers. To enumerate and analyze these relations, with the conditions under which alone they are discoverable, is to teach the science of Method.

(*Collected Works* 4, I, p. 451)

Then how does Coleridge think the consideration of relations could lead the mind to the mediation between those which cannot actually be mediated, i.e., between the individual and

the universal, or between the finite and the infinite? How can the mind set itself free from and surpass the limit of experience, i.e., generalization from observations, to realize initiative?

## I. Mind and Law

According to his observation that “the RELATIONS of objects are prime *materials* of Method, and that the contemplation of relations is the indispensable condition of thinking methodically”, Coleridge points out there being two kinds of relation in which “objects of mind may be contemplated”.<sup>1)</sup> He calls the first of them “Law”, and explains its nature:

The first is that of LAW, which, in its absolute perfection, is conceivable only of the Supreme Being, whose creative IDEA not only appoints to each thing its *position*, but in that position, gives it its qualities, yea, it gives its very existence, as *that particular* thing.

(*Collected Works* 4, I, p. 459)

So only in the system of law each thing can be known in its proper position in the world, which, therefore, is followed by the knowledge of its essence and existence. But for a law to be present in the mind, “in whatever science the relation of the parts to each other and to the whole is predetermined by a truth originating in the *mind*, and not abstracted or generalized from observation of the parts”.<sup>2)</sup> So it is in the mind itself, not in the things, that the mind must find a law which determines the relation of things to each other and to the whole. And Coleridge affirms the presence of a law in “the physical sciences, as of astronomy for instance” or “the presence of fundamental *ideas*” in geometry.<sup>3)</sup>

Here we have to notice that even in “the physical sciences” which seem to be based on the generalization from observations and experiments, Coleridge sees the initiative of the mind as an essential condition for them to be true sciences. The mind should first find in itself a truth which predetermines “the relation of the parts to each other and to the whole”. Coleridge further explains the nature of law:

We have thus assigned the first place in the science of Method to LAW; and first of the first, to *Law*, as the absolute *kind* which comprehending in itself the substance of every possible degree precludes from its conception all degree, not by generalization but by its own plenitude. As such, therefore, and as the sufficient cause of the reality correspondent thereto, we contemplate it as exclusively an attribute of the Supreme Being, inseparable from the idea of God: adding, however, that from the contemplation of law in this, its only perfect form, must be derived all true insight into all other grounds and principles necessary to Method, as the science common to all sciences, . . . Alienated from this (intuition shall we call it? or stedfast faith?) ingeious men may produce schemes, conductive to the peculiar purposes of particular sciences, but not scientific system.

(*Collected Works* 4, I, pp. 459–60)

Once found in the mind, law must be thought in its perfect form to be the absolute kind from which emanates every degree, and to be the sufficient cause to which corresponds the reality. Scientific system must now be based on the method whose grounds and principles derive from the contemplation of law in this perfect form. Then how can the mind contemplate such law to acquire the method? By way of intuition or faith,

Coleridge suggests. Anyway it comes from the acting of the mind to itself, but Coleridge cannot help admitting that it is impossible for the mind to find the ground of this intuition or faith itself. It must be some kind of a leap in the mind itself. So he says:

But though we cannot enter on the proof of this assertion, we dare not remain exposed to the suspicion of having obtruded a mere private opinion, as a fundamental truth.

(*Collected Works* 4, I, p. 460)

What Coleridge could do was to appeal to the writings of ancient authorities. He quotes Eusebius as saying:

Plato, who philosophized legitimately and perfectly, if ever any man did in any age, held it for an axiom, that it is not possible for us to have an insight into things human (i.e. *the nature and relations of man, and the objects presented by nature for his investigation*), without a previous contemplation (or intellectual vision) of things divine: that is, of truths that are to be affirmed concerning the absolute, as far as they can be known to us.

(*Collected Works* 4, I, p. 460)

Here “a previous contemplation (or intellectual vision) of things divine” is emphasized as necessary for us to have an insight into things human, but the ground of how “truths that are to be affirmed concerning the absolute” are known to us is not shown, except that the axiom comes from Plato. Coleridge resets the problem according to Plato:

The grand problem, the solution of which forms, according to

Plato, the final object and distinctive character of philosophy, is this: *for all that exists conditionally* (i.e. the existence of which is inconceivable except under the condition of its dependency on some other as antecedent) *to find a ground that is unconditional and absolute, and thereby to reduce the aggregate of human knowledge to a system.*

(*Collected Works* 4, I, p. 461)

Taking the solar system as an example, Coleridge explains the case as follows:

For the relation common to all being known, the appropriate orbit of each becomes discoverable, together with its peculiar relations to its concentrics in the common sphere of subordination. Thus the centrality of the sun having been established, and the law of the distances of the planets from the sun having been determined, we possess the means of calculating the distance of each from the other.

(*Collected Works* 4, I, p. 461)

It should be noticed that the finding of the solar system is not based on the observation, for the establishment of the centrality of the sun, which is the establishment of a new relation, does not come from the generalization of observations, but from the internal activity of the mind which moves the centre of the universe from the earth to the sun. For the finding of the universal law, therefore, there should be this kind of leap in the activities of the mind which is exactly what Coleridge calls the mental initiative.

Then what is the structure of the mind which makes this initiative possible? And how does the law thus found correspond to the reality which is behind the phenomenon of experience?



## II. Mind and Idea

If the most essential element of methodical thinking by the mental initiative is the mediation between the particular and the universal, the realization of this thinking such as the finding of a law must surely take the form of symbolic expression. For Coleridge defines symbol as follows:

... a Symbol ... is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part of that Unity, of which it is the representative.<sup>1)</sup>

Once formed, a symbol mediates between the individual and the universal by its power of expression, and so “partakes the Reality”. And for a symbol to have this power of expression, it must be a living part of the whole system of symbols, while the system must be a unity of the living parts, that is, an organic unity. So to understand the process of methodical thinking, it should now be asked what structure of the mind makes the production of such symbols possible.

The power of the mind which produces symbols is, according to Coleridge, imagination, for he thinks imagination is:

that reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the Reason in Images of the Sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the Senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the Reason, gives birth to a system of

symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the *conductors*.

(*Collected Works* 6, p. 29)

Imagination mediates between sense and reason, but to produce symbols, it must be energized by reason. The energy of reason is self-circling and permanent, and Coleridge calls reason “forma formans”, which, he says, “contains in itself the law of its own conceptions”.<sup>2)</sup>

Reason, in the highest sense of the term, as the focal point of the Theoric and Practical, or as both in One, is the Source of Ideas and conversely, an Idea is a self-affirming Truth at once theoric and practical, which the Reason presents to itself, as a form of itself.

(*Collected Works* 6, p. 61, f.n.)

Reason, with its own energy, can produce its own world of ideas which it presents to itself as forms of itself. And it is this self-grounded function of reason that can be the basis of Coleridge’s methodical thinking, for mental initiative must be the mind’s own working to find the leading idea in itself. This is the function of reason, but it can also be seen as the nature of ideas, so ideas are “not merely formal but dynamic”, and “every principle is actualized by an idea; and every idea is living, productive, partaketh of infinity, and (as Bacon has sublimely observed) containth an endless power of semination”.<sup>3)</sup> And naturally only in the world of ideas can there be the presence of the universal. Coleridge further explains the nature of an idea:

... that ... which is an educt of the Imagination actuated by

the pure Reason, to which there neither is or can be an adequate correspondent in the world of the senses—this and this alone is=AN IDEA. Whether Ideas are regulative only, according to Aristotle and Kant; or likewise CONSTITUTIVE, and one with the power and Life of Nature, according to Plato, or Plotinus . . . is the highest problem of Philosophy, . . .

(*Collected Works* 6, pp. 113-4)

Coleridge believes the existence of the world of ideas which develops independently of “the world of the senses” by the power of imagination actuated by “the pure Reason”. The world of senses could only be the materials of ideas in the producing of symbols by imagination, so the expression of the universal in the individual by symbols is made possible only by the independent activities of reason of presenting ideas to itself.

Then how could the world of ideas correspond to the reality of nature and universe to make knowledge possible? By the power of expression of symbols, of course. As we have seen, this power, Coleridge thinks, is based on life, because for symbols to express reality they should be organically united.

Here in order to verify the validity of his own idea of method of mental initiative, Coleridge introduces life as the universal power of expression by supposing its basic elements to be the same as those of reason. Of the nature and the elements of reason Coleridge explains:

. . . Reason is the knowledge of the laws of the whole considered as One: and as such it is contradistinguished from the Understanding, which concerns itself exclusively with the quantities, qualities, and relations of *particulars* in time and space. The Understanding, therefore, is the science of

phaenomena, and their subsumption under distinct kinds and sorts, (*genus* and *species*.) Its functions supply the rules and constitute the possibility of Experience; but remain mere logical *forms*, except as *materials* are given by the senses and sensations. The Reason, on the other hand, is the science of the *universal*, having the ideas of Oneness and Allness as its two elements or primary factors.

(*Collected Works* 6, pp. 59–60)

While understanding has no realm of activity of its own and must always be given materials by senses, reason is free from particulars in time and space, and can be the science of the universal, that is, the knowledge of the laws of the whole considered as one, for it has “the ideas of Oneness and Allness as its two elements or primary factors”. And from the consideration of reason realized in its highest form, i.e., religion, Coleridge must have been led to the knowledge of the essence of life as a universal power.

... Reason as the science of All as the Whole, must be interpenetrated by a Power, that represents the concentration of All in Each—a power that acts by a contraction of universal truths into individual duties, as the only form in which those truths can attain life and reality. Now this is Religion, which is the Executive of our nature, and on this account the name of highest dignity, and the symbol of sovereignty.

(*Collected Works* 6, p. 64)

So in his *Theory of Life*, after criticizing various definitions of life given by others as incomprehensive, Coleridge could present his own idea as follows:

. . . the most comprehensive formula to which life is reducible, would be that of the internal copula of bodies, or (if we may venture to borrow a phrase from the Platonic school) the *power* which discloses itself from within as a principle of *unity* in the *many*. But . . . , I should at the same time have borrowed a scholastic *term*, and defined life *absolutely*, as the principle of unity in *multeity*, as far as the former, the unity to wit, is produced *ab intra*; but *eminently* (*sensu eminenti*), I define life as *the principle of individuation*, or the power which unites a given *all* into a *whole* that is presupposed by all its parts. The link that combines the two and acts throughout both, will, of course, be defined by the *tendency* to *individuation*.<sup>4)</sup>

For the presentation of “the most comprehensive formula” of life as the universal reality, the basic elements of the definition should not come from the generalization of experiences, but from the reason itself as the science of the universal which has the ideas of Oneness and Allness as its two elements or primary factors. According to his own idea of method, Coleridge defines life metaphysically and absolutely, and not physically, deliberately depending on the Platonic and scholastic terms. And as those two primary factors of reason are contradictory, there develops a mediatory concept of “unity” as a tendency, from which comes the idea of the most general law of this tendency of “polarity, or the essential dualism of Nature, arising out of its productive unity, and still tending to reaffirm it, either as equilibrium, indifference, or identity”.<sup>5)</sup>

Life . . . we consider as the copula, or the unity of thesis and antithesis, position and counterposition,—Life itself being the positive of both; as on the other hand, the two counterpoints

are the necessary conditions of the *manifestations* of Life.

(*Complete Works*, I, p. 392)

Under these necessary conditions life manifests itself in its most universal form as the tendency to individuation. And Coleridge considers “the degrees and intensities of Life” as consisting in “the progressive realization of this tendency”.<sup>6)</sup> So life expresses itself in degrees according to the realization of the tendency to individuation. There must be a progressive order in nature which consists in the intensity of life.

Once defined in the world of ideas under Coleridge’s metaphysical prerequisites, this concept of life as the universal power of expression leads him to various discoveries on man, nature, and the universe which can be the foundation of his cosmological construction.

### **Conclusion: Structure of the Subject**

In his *Theory of Life*, according to the law of the tendency by which life is defined as the universal power of expression, Coleridge traces the process of nature from “the requisite and only serviceable fiction” of “the representation of CHAOS as one vast homogeneous drop”.<sup>1)</sup>

In this sense it may be justified, as an appropriate symbol of the great fundamental truth that all things spring from, and subsist in, the endless strife between indifference and difference. The whole history of Nature is comprised in the specification of the transitional states from the one to the other. The symbol only is fictitious: the thing signified is not only grounded in truth—it is the law and actuating principle of all other truths, whether physical or intellectual.

(*Complete Works*, I, p. 401)

Coleridge starts from the fiction of chaos which is precomposed “as one vast homogeneous drop” according to his idea of the law of life, and so is grounded in truth as his idea of method affirms, and which, once established, leads to the findings of all other truths. And Coleridge traces the progress of nature to “that last work, in which Nature did not assist as handmaid under the eye of her sovereign Master, who made Man in his own image, by superadding self-consciousness with self-government, and breathed into him a living soul”.<sup>2)</sup> Man is nature’s last work who is characterized by self-consciousness which, with self-government, is superadded by the supreme being. Therefore:

... in man, as the highest of the class, the individuality is not only perfected in its corporeal sense, but begins a new series beyond the appropriate limits of physiology.

(*Complete Works*, I, p. 390)

Thus man as a self-conscious being must be:

the one great end of Nature, her ultimate production of the highest and most comprehensive individuality. This must be the one great end of Nature, her ultimate object, or by whatever other word we may designate that something which bears to a final cause the same relation that Nature herself bears to the Supreme Intelligence.

(*Complete Works*, I, p. 391)

Coleridge’s definition of life leads us to the finding of man as a self-conscious being where only is the presence of the supreme

being.

Then what is the nature of self-consciousness, and what is its relation to the supreme intelligence? In the 12th chapter of *Biographia Literaria*, for the construction of “the Dynamic Philosophy” planned as the third treatise of his *Logosophia*, Coleridge enumerates the basic theses of the philosophy. There he proposes “SUM or I AM” as the first principle, and he immediately tries to express it indiscriminately “by the words, spirit, self, and self-consciousness”, saying, “In this, and in this alone, object and subject, being and knowing, are identical, each involving and supposing the other. In other words, it is a subject which becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself; but which never is an object except for itself, and only so far as by the very same act it becomes a subject”.<sup>3)</sup> Self-consciousness is now considered to be identical with the act of a subject of constructing itself to itself in which being and knowing are identical. Once constructed objectively, a subject has become an object to itself, and a subject itself is now in a state of nothingness. To fill this state, a subject must again construct itself to itself, and the process continues endlessly. It is on this process which can be identified with mental initiative or imagination, i.e., reason’s presenting of ideas to itself, that man’s creative activities, his knowledge, and his existence are based.

Then what is the relation of self-consciousness to the Supreme Intelligence? In the 12th chapter also of *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge identifies subject with self and intelligence, and consciousness with representation, considering intelligence as “exclusively representative”.<sup>4)</sup> So self-consciousness can also be considered as the self-representation of intelligence in which intelligence becomes intelligence by the act of expressing itself to itself. Then “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM”



in Coleridge's definition of imagination in the 13th chapter of *Biographia Literaria* can be identified with the process of the Supreme Intelligence expressing itself to itself. It is this process that imagination repeats in the human mind as self-consciousness or self-representation of intelligence. And it is this relation of the human mind with the Supreme Intelligence that could be the final ground of the mediation by symbols between the individual and the universal.

As we have seen, Coleridge's cosmology of universal intelligence is constructed on the basis of his idea of symbolic expression which is characterized by the mediation between the individual and the universal. So Coleridge's philosophical inquiry should be on how this mediation by symbols is made possible. According to his idea of method which emphasizes mental initiative, Coleridge tries to make clear the structure of the mind which gives symbols this power of mediation, and he finds imagination which is identified with the activity of reason of presenting ideas to itself. He then tries to ground this activity of reason on the universal reality, and finds life as the universal power of expression acting both in nature and the human mind. And in the highest degree of life, the human mind as self-consciousness, can there be the presence of the universal intelligence in the form of symbolic expression.

Coleridge's cosmological system can really be seen as based on his idea of life. But it should now be noticed that this idea of life does not come from the observation of nature, but is from the beginning composed metaphysically according to his metaphysical prerequisites, so that it can partake of the universal reality.

Coleridge applied his own idea of method to ground his cosmological vision. And only in his cosmological vision could he finally ground his own idea of method.

## Notes

## Preface

- 1) Coleridge, S. T., *Collected Works* 7, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Engell and W. J. Bate (Princeton, NJ, 1983), I, p. 304.
- 2) Coleridge, S. T., *Collected Works* 4, *The Friend*, I, ed. B. E. Rooke (Princeton, NJ 1969), pp. 448-524.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 457.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 455.

## I.

- 1) Coleridge, S. T., *Collected Works* 4, I, p. 458.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 459.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 459.

## II.

- 1) Coleridge, S. T., *Collected Works* 6, *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (Princeton, NJ, 1972), p. 30.
- 2) Coleridge, S. T., *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1956-71), II, p. 1198, Letter to Thomas Clarkson, 13 Oct., 1806.
- 3) Coleridge, S. T., *Collected Works* 6, pp. 23-4.
- 4) Coleridge, S. T., *Complete Works*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd, 7 vols. (New York, 1871), I, pp. 386-7.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 391.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 391.

## Conclusion

- 1) Coleridge, S. T., *Complete Works*, I, p. 401.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 411.
- 3) Coleridge, S. T., *Collected Works* 7, I, pp. 272-3.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 255.

### Coleridge's Works

- The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by K. Coburn and B. Winer, Vols. 1-7, 10, 12, 13, and 14, (Princeton, NJ, 1969~).
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- Biographia Literaria*, ed. by J. Shawcross, 2 vols., (Oxford, 1907).
- The Philosophical Lectures of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. by K. Coburn, (London, 1949).