

Coleridge's Transcendental Philosophy: Knowing through Conscience as "a Spiritual Sensation"

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Coleridge's Ideas of Conscience

THE 36-YEAR-OLD COLERIDGE, in *The Friend* in 1809, believed that the conscience, whose reality is God, "unconditionally *commands* us to attribute *reality*, and actual *existence*... to the ideas of Soul, of Free-will, of Immortality, and of God!" (F I 112, F II 78-9). And he continues to explain his teleological view of nature that the outer world is to provide us with materials to actualize the ideas of Reason. Coleridge's idea of the commands of conscience postulates the pre-established universal harmony between the conscience and the law of nature. Nature as "the aggregated *materials* of duty" (F I 112, F II 80) forms our actual experiences that deepen our awareness of "Soul, of Free-will, of Immortality, and of God." In "Confessio Fidei of S. T. Coleridge" written in the following year, in 1810, he called the conscience "the sole fountain of certainty" (CN III 4005). This is because Coleridge believes that the essential inborn notion of God is awakened by the conscience. The conscience commands us to believe in the "fearful Mystery" of the Original Sin that makes capable of moral evil but not of moral good ourselves. This belief stimulates our will of the practical Reason to "receive with full and grateful Faith" that the Son of God "assumed our human nature in order to redeem all mankind from... our connate Corruption." Therefore, Coleridge writes that the conscience for us is the power to believe and "attribute Reality" to our postulate that God created us as "a Free Agent... hav[ing] a will" to feel morally responsible for becoming happy receivers of "so wonderful an Act of Divine Love" of the Redeemer.¹ Now what is characteristic in Coleridge's explanation of the conscience is that he regards it as a means to pursue our responsibility of conceiving and actually feeling "the utmost of the infinite greatness of that [God's] Love" sending us the Holy Spirit so as not to be trapped by "the Pains and Pleasure of this Life" (CN III 4005).

At the age of 44 Coleridge began dictating *The Statesman's Manual*—probably to John Morgan—after going to live with the Gillmans in 1816 (LS xxxn). *Biographia Literaria* was then on the point of publication. And it was in *The Statesman's Manual* that Coleridge regarded the conscience as "a spiritual sensation," though worrying about its inherent contradictions:

The conscience is neither reason, religion, or will, but an *experience* (*sui generis*) of the coincidence of the human will with reason and

¹ As Ronald C. Wendling precisely writes, human freedom for Coleridge, that brings us "the highest of human satisfactions," "consists in discovering God's will for us, which we may do through Reason and conscience, and obeying that will" (*Coleridge's Progress to Christianity: Experience and Authority in Religious Faith*. London: Associated University Press, 1955) 158. Now my aim of this paper is to trace how Coleridge's ideas of conscience work together to form his own transcendental philosophy as a means to prove our full potential for responding to the Love of God willing to reveal His Love through His creatures.

religion. It might, perhaps, be called a *spiritual sensation*... Strictly speaking... the conscience is neither a sensation or a sense; but a testifying state, best described in the words of our liturgy, as THE PEACE OF GOD THAT PASSETH ALL UNDERSTANDING. (LS 66-67)

Coleridge's unique definition of conscience as "a spiritual sensation" to experience "THE PEACE OF GOD" characterizes his view of metaphysics, or his transcendental philosophy, as our ability to put religious truth before scientific truth for our spiritual calmness.² By thinking that the conscience enables us to experience "the felt presence of mystery,"³ Coleridge strives to pursue the true image of the self to quicken our spiritual correspondence with God. Coleridge's various explanations of the conscience indicate that personal experiences witnessed by the conscience provide us with the best materials to do what are pleasing to God, to awaken the God-given notion of God.

Coleridge emphasizes in *The Statesman's Manual* that "the elements... of Religion are Reason and Understanding," and that "*essential* Religion" (LS 90) requires

... the two component counter-powers [Reason and Understanding] actually interpenetrat[ing] each other, and generat[ing] a higher third, including both the former, ita tamen ut sit alia et major [in such a way, however, that it is different and greater]. (LS 89 and n)

According to Coleridge, "a higher third" is a product of the interdependent Reason and Understanding, which enables us to "receive the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry Abba, Father" (LS 90). It is this "higher third" the conscience apprehends. The conscience is to witness the coexistence of the Spirit with our spirit to prove that "we are the children of God" as is described in The Epistle of Paul to the Romans (8.15-6). Therefore, for the Coleridge of *The Statesman's Manual*, "the peace of God" as "a mystery of infinite solution," witnessed by the conscience, is "the spirit of adoption" received for our wondrous "god-like transfiguration" (LS 91) to the children of God. On that process, we are to foster our fellow-feelings of sympathy "with all creation in its groans to be redeemed" (LS 90), so Coleridge believes. The cultivation of such a feeling of sympathy towards others is an indicator of our degrees of godlikeness.⁴ A feeling of sympathy towards others is "the increase of

² Cf. CN III 4005

³ J. Robert Barth, S.J. *The Symbolic Imagination* (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1977) 133. According to Barth, there is "a loss of the immanent presence of the transcendent; with this, there is a loss of the felt presence of mystery" in the eighteenth-century thought; whereas, in the Romantic spirit, there is always the will to embrace "the element of mystery." Then it can be said that for Coleridge and the Wordsworth of *The Prelude* as "the poem to Coleridge" (Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth The Prelude*, Landmarks of World Literature, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, 14-18), poetry is to reflect their innermost wonder at the mysterious workings of the conscience that stimulate their imagination.

⁴ LL I 315 goes: "Man alone was privileged to clothe himself and to do all things so as to make him as it were a secondary creator of himself & of his own happiness or misery and in this as in all the image of his Maker was impressed upon him."

Consciousness" (LS 89)⁵ about newly realized relations with the dissimilar yet the similar neighbors. The principle of finality of all things around us is to let us pay attention to the absolute truth that we were created to feel happiness of regeneration.⁶ In addition, as the last three lines of the following quotation from Coleridge's letter to Thomas Clarkson in 1806 indicate, the feeling of rebirth is accompanied by the wondrous experience, through the conscience, of giving up the individual will of our own particular being:

... Man is truly altered by the co-existence of other men; his faculties cannot be developed in himself alone, & only by himself. Therefore the human race not by a bold metaphor, but in a sublime reality, approach to, & might become, one body whose Head is Christ (the Logos) ... A spacious field... opens itself for moral reflection, both for Faith, and for Consolation, when we consider the growth of consciousness (and of what kind our's is, our *conscience* sufficiently reveals to us: for of what use or meaning could *Conscience* be to a Being, who in any state of it's Existence should become to itself utterly lost, and entirely new?) as the end of our earthly Being... (CL II 1197-98)

In the "Essay on Faith" written in 1820 Coleridge explained the conscience etymologically:

Conscire = scire aliquid cum me: or to know something in its relation to myself, and in the act of knowing myself as acted on by that something. (SWF II 837)

The conscience is a witnessing of the God's Power acting on us to realize the subordination of our will "to the Reason, as = the [similar and yet not the same] Will of God" (SWF II 838). Coleridge also in "The Essay on Faith," regularly says that the final end of nature is to let us reflect on our possible godlikeness, i.e., the awakened notion of influences given by God.⁷ By means of "a *good* Conscience" (SWF II 836),⁸ we experience that God demonstrates His workings upon us in our willing "self-subjection" (AR 217) to them. Then we feel the happiness of believing in the God's Will to reveal his Peace to his creatures that are similar and yet not the same. "Wise passiveness" enables us

⁵ The following explanation of "The increase of Consciousness" on the finality of nature in LS 89 is the result of becoming conscious of what the conscience as "a spiritual sensation" witnesses: "... all things that surround us, and all things that happen unto us, have... all one common final cause: namely, the increase of Consciousness, in such wise, that whatever part of the terra incognita of our nature the increased consciousness discovers, our will may conquer and bring into subjection to itself under the sovereignty of reason."

⁶ See "Reflection on God's Ideas" in SWF I 156.

⁷ See, e.g., above n.5.

⁸ As Laurence Lockridge points out, Coleridge knows the danger of Kantian infallible conscience that works as "isolated tribunal" (*Coleridge the Moralist*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977) 123. So in the "Essay on Faith," Coleridge comes to distinguish "a good conscience" and "a bad conscience;" the former produces a total energy of "the Whole Moral Man" to know and behold "the Sum of Spiritual Truths, representing and manifesting the Will of Divine—" (SWF II 843-4).

to feel “an under-sense of greatest” (*The Prelude* 1805 Book VII 712) as the *terra incognita* within us which involves the workings of the conscience used constitutively to produce “a second nature” that symbolizes the happy intuition of the willing self-subjection to a greater and better existence for our consolation; happy because there we are able to act according to “the consciousness of [moral] *responsibility*” (SWF II 836) stimulated by the conscience.

Coleridge's Transcendentalism

We cannot experience the transcendent ideas but the transcendental *a priori* principle can be reduced and experienced in a system of idealism.⁹ If we free ourselves from the law of nature the understanding comprehends, so as to grope for our innermost consciousness, there arises, in Coleridge's opinion,

... a *philosophic* (and inasmuch as it is actualized by an effort of freedom, an *artificial*) *consciousness*, which lies beneath or (as it were) *behind* the spontaneous consciousness natural to all reflecting beings. (BL I 236)

Coleridge's transcendental idealism is to consciously observe the self when it experiences “the peace of God” by the conscience as “a spiritual sensation.” Transcendental philosophers should consciously separate, by “an effort of freedom,” the two propositions, “*I exist*, and *There are things outside me*, which in ordinary consciousness are fused together” (Schelling 9). Only through this artificial act of separation, do we get the transcendental mode of apprehending the proposition “*I exist*” or “*I am*” that exhibits the identity between subject and object in the act of self-consciousness. There can exist no other object like the self in self-consciousness, since the object of the self-consciousness cannot exist without conscious act of producing the self as the object for itself. The self of self-consciousness is always in the conflict of two opposing directions, the objective self directed outward and the subjective self directed inward to its infinite spirit (Schelling 44-45;¹⁰ BL I 273).

According to Orsini, Thesis VI of Chapter 12 of *Biographia Literaria* is “one of the most important, since Coleridge here begins by making a perfect statement of the idealistic doctrine of the absolute self-consciousness, and then brings forward his theistic qualifications to it” (207). In fact, Coleridge's explanation added to Thesis VI goes:

Here then we have, by anticipation the distinction between the

⁹ In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge follows Kant's distinction between the transcendent and the transcendental (I 237 and n). Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason* explains that the transcendent principle commands us to “transgress” the limits of experience, but the transcendental principle is “immanent” within the limit of possible experience and controls our ways of knowing things derived from experience (A 296/B352-353; tr. Norman Kemp Smith, NY: St Martin's Press, 1965, 298-99). See Orsini, *Coleridge and German Idealism* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969) 78-81.

¹⁰ *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), (trans. Peter Heath, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1978)

conditional finite I (which as known in distinct consciousness by occasion of experience is called by Kant's followers the empirical I) and the absolute I AM, and likewise the dependence or rather the inherence of the former in the latter: in whom "we live, and move, and have our being," as St. Paul divinely asserts... (BL I 277)

"The conditional finite I" is the limited self intuited by the theoretical Understanding; whereas, the interdependence of Reason and Understanding in "an act of passiveness" (SWF II 836) toward the reception of the God-given "spirit of adoption" is the limiting self apprehended by Reason, as the "the ground of existence, and the ground of the knowledge of existence" of "the empirical I." As I mentioned above, Coleridge regards, in *The Statesman's Manual*, "a higher third" as the interpenetration of the two opposites that goes on creating a higher world.¹¹ Our Understanding and Reason are to foster essential Religion by the conscious act of "receive[ing] the spirit of adoption" that develops us into the children of God. In a sense, the conscience is to grasp the artificial or artistic consciousness of the self trying to embody "with the conscious will" (BL I 304) his own self feeling "astonished and blessed"¹² by the "spirit of adoption" that he received unaware as the Ancient Mariner did before the blessings of the beautiful water snakes. "The peace of God" experienced by the conscience as the "sole fountain of certainty" could be exhibited in its original identity of the subjective and the objective, the conscious and the nonconscious, only through intellectual intuition. Therefore, Coleridge insists that the fine arts should derive from and be fostered by Religion (LS 62) because arts deal with what Religion witnesses and waits for, that is, the mysterious union of the universal and the individual realized incomprehensibly through the help of the universal that supplies universal objectivity to the individual subject.

Coleridge and Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" Compared

Coleridge in one of the lectures on the principles of poetry in 1808 declares that the true pleasure we get from the fine arts is the sense that "we are no more *deceived*" (LL I 133), and he refers to Adam Smith's *Posthumous Essays*. Smith, for instance, in "Of the Imitative Arts" mentions that "the works of the great masters in Statuary and Painting... never produce their effect by

¹¹ According to Coleridge, he had been perusing Plato's *Timaeus* in earnest at the time of writing Chapter 12 of *Biographia Literaria* where he introduced Schelling's transcendental philosophy (BL I 233). This suggests that both Coleridge and Schelling, who wrote *Timaeus: Ein Manuscript zu Platon* in 1794, agreed with Plato explaining the necessity of "a third to act as a bond to hold them [the invisible, and the visible and tangible] together" when "this world came to be in very truth, through god's providence, a living being with soul and intelligence" (Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, tr. Desmond Lee, Penguin Classics, first edition 1965, rev. in 1977, 43-44). Also see Schelling (*System of Transcendental Idealism*, 44) where he writes, "... neither through the limiting nor the limited activities, by themselves, do we arrive at self-consciousness. There is, accordingly, a third activity, compounded of these two, whereby the self of self-consciousness is engendered." I think, for Coleridge, "a third" acting as a bond between "the Will, as = Self" and "the Reason, as = the Will of God" is the received "spirit of adoption, whereby we cry Abba, Father," witnessed by the conscience only when we become "conscious of a Conscience" (SWF II 836) in the act of self-consciousness.

¹² Schelling, 221.

deception,” so they inspire admiration, giving us the pleasure of thinking how the wondrous resemblance between the two incompatible things, “the imitating and the imitated object,”¹³ is produced. And Music more than Statuary and Painting deals with “the happiness of human life” or the worst of human life that cause “our indulgence and compassionate assistance to its unavoidable weaknesses, its distresses, and its misfortunes;” “The sentiments and passions which Music can best imitate are those which unite and bind men together in society...” (“Of the Imitative Art,” 193).

Smith emphasizes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), that we are selfish by nature, but at the same “naturally sympathetic,”¹⁴ trying to put ourselves in the situation of other, not-self. And on this “imaginary change of situation” we found our sympathy (TMS 27). We also hold our “delusion of self-love” in check by observing generally accepted social rules (TMS 184) in order to get sympathy from others. Here, the conscience as “the impartial spectator” works to restore “some degree of tranquility and sedateness” (TMS 97, 28). Smith thinks that the conscience as “the great judge and arbiter of our conduct” (TMS 158) guides us to the humble hope of a life to come, promised by God as “a still higher tribunal... whose eye can never be deceived” (TMS 153). Similar to Coleridge,¹⁵ the conscience for Smith is to experience “a higher third” coming out of the inner conflict between self-love and fellow feeling. That is the spiritual calmness filled with the spirit of prayers to “the great Author of our nature” (TMS 196) :

The happiness of mankind... seems to have been the original purpose intended by the Author of nature, when he brought them into existence... [B]y acting according to the dictates of our moral faculties, we necessarily pursue the most effectual means for promoting the happiness of mankind, and may therefore be said, in some sense, to co-operate with the Deity, and to advance as far as in our power the plan of Providence. (TMS 193)

The conscience for Coleridge and Adam Smith is to let us become conscious of the transcendental true self-image, the weak limited self always hoping and, at the same time, fearing for the coexistence of the personal Creator whose original Will is to lead us to the happy experience of becoming a representative of Deity.

According to James Engel, P. B. Shelley was much influenced by Adam Smith.¹⁶ And as Hugh Roberts writes, Shelley after reading *Biographia Literaria* and *The Statesman's Manual*, admitted Coleridge's genius as a great poet of the

¹³ *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, eds. W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1982), 183-4.

¹⁴ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (hereafter TMS), Ed. Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 26.

¹⁵ Coleridge owned both of *Essays on Philosophical Subject* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Ralph J. Coffman, *Coleridge's Library: A Bibliography of Books Owned or Read by Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987) 195.

¹⁶ *The Creative Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard UP, 1981) 149-50.

age.¹⁷ The influence of Shelley's reading of the Coleridge's two works that refer to "the final bliss of the glorified spirit" (SM 48)¹⁸ variously postulated according to his belief in "a spiritual sensation" can be seen in "A Defence of Poetry." In it, Shelley declares that "A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and numbers are not" (513).¹⁹ He also says that "poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth" (515). These are the result of the universal truth that "all spirits that feel the falling of the pleasurable will open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight" (516). This kind of Shelley's explanation echoes Coleridge's conscious artistic effort to describe how the divinity worked upon him by which the mysterious unconscious self-subjection to the divine became possible. Shelley writes that "Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man" through Love as "a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own" (517). Shelley admits the importance of "wondrous sympathy" (533) with otherness so as to receive happy visitations of the divinity that supplies objectivity to his conscious. Shelley as well as Wordsworth²⁰ admits with Coleridge the significance of our conscious "act of passiveness" toward others to open our eyes to the greater power acting on us to actualize, though momentarily, our sincere hope for the experience of genuine freedom from our petty selfishness.

¹⁷ "Shelley Among the Post-Kantians," *Studies in Romanticism*, 35 (Summer 1996): 295-329.

¹⁸ As for BL, see, for instance, II 245 and n, on the mind's "rejoices in th[e] divine love or blessedness," the phrase taken from Spinoza's *Ethics* by Coleridge in the conclusion.

¹⁹ *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (A Norton Critical Edition, 2002).

²⁰ See e.g. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805) Book XIII 83-122 (A Norton Critical Edition, eds, Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, 1979) 462-464.