Coleridge's Cosmic Sense of Ideas

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'YOU ARE SITTING IN A PUB', SUGGEST THE EDITORS of this celebratory volume, 'and having found out you are a Coleridgean someone asks what interests you particularly'. So, we huddle 'in any alehouse, over the Saturday night's jug of beer, discussing', to borrow a scene from *Church and State*, some of his potent insights and articulations, where none round the table, once they feel that intellectual current, 'doubt for a moment that they are fully possessed by the idea'.[1] The idea: 'the Ideas of Being, Form, Life, the Reason, the Law of Conscience, Freedom, Immortality, God!' '[T]he ideas of … eternity, … will, absolute truth, of the good, the true, the beautiful, the infinite'.[2] For Coleridge, 'an Idea … is not merely *formal* but dynamic', clarifying, in Greek, that 'every Idea is a Power'.[3] Ideas as powers evolve through energies, forces, and accidents to circle back up to the idea of ideas: *lógos*, which for Coleridge included Heraclitus's Logos, the constant intelligence behind the universal flux, and the Christian Word, which was in the beginning, and is with God, and is God. This 'Logos, Idea Idearum', [4] essentially the archetype or apex of all ideas, has been exalted, opposed, submerged, but never irrelevant.[5]

Tranches of his philosophy and shards of his text resonate as 'deep calls to deep',[6] and I hope I might encourage some readers to pursue the philosophical Coleridge beyond the *Biographia*. Thrillingly conveying the excitement of ideas, he likens their effect to 'an exile in a far distant land' hearing the 'annunciation of principles, of ideas', and 'the soul … awakes, and starts up' as if, 'when after long years of absence, and almost of oblivion, he is suddenly addressed in his own mother tongue'.[7] With a cosmic sense of ideas and our intimate relation to them, Coleridge relayed a perpetually exciting and energizing pulse of human thought. We are, in an important sense, *made* of such ideas. Beyond the impress of our nervy senses, dim intuitions of ideas attract like an intellectual gravity. Though never fully graspable, when we feel the attraction or see by the light of an idea, we are drawn into a cosmic interiority that Coleridge felt compelled to call eternal. But as the new sun of analytic philosophy rose in the twentieth century—propounded by George Edward Moore, then followed by Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein—it initiated an eclipse that still leaves much to

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1 C&S 16.

2 F 1 106; C&S 47 fn.

3 LS 61 fn.

4 Idea Idearum: Idea of Ideas, 'the system or kosmos, of Ideas', God as truth (CN 4524, April 1819); Logos as comprehensive (CN 4 §5078), as 'all ultimate Ends in one, and hence every ultimate End must be an Idea, and Ideas only can be ultimate Ends—the Idea of God, of Holiness, of Truth, of Love, of Beauty, of Immortality, &c' (CN 5 6666, March 1832). Derived from Plato's Good as the superessential (beyond being) idea of ideas (*Republic* 6 509b8–10).

5 CN 4 §4901 (April 1822); var. §§4524 (April 1819) and 5078 f33^{v} (December 1823).

6 Psalm 42:7.

7 SM 24.

be recharted.[8] Dismissing most metaphysics as technically nonsense, some analytic philosophers similarly abandoned ethics and aesthetics, leaving few places in the mainstream, besides intellectual history, to approach the 'spiritual platonic'[9] tradition and its universal ideas akin to the Pythagorean harmony of the spheres.

Immanuel Kant argued that despite physical, selfish, and social pressures, our freedom lies in recognizing how things (logically) must be and how they (ethically) ought to be. Going further, Coleridge realized that we are made up of an ideality and a stretching towards truth and that this is what makes our lives meaningful. There's a divinity (divine ideas) that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will (human error and sin). The ideas are never merely human thoughts, they are cosmic and, for Coleridge (and the older tradition), divine. At best we attain to them. We compose ourselves along continua of ideals and errors, from contemplation of 'the eternal verities'[10] (divine ideas, higher principles), through local stories and histories, to abject falsities and deception, all making up our courses, fidelities, fears, and comforts, that blend into normal life.

> The *Heart* should have *fed* upon the *truth*, as Insects on a Leaf—till it be tinged with the colour, and shew it's food in every the minutest fibre.[11]

Whatever feeds your soul (and 'man cannot live by bread alone'), it becomes expressed in the life you live. These ideas are the fabric of our reality as human beings and '*the life* that we live', since they 'constitute [our] *humanity*'.[12] Like the intuitions of mathematics, they are more deeply ingrained and more truly universal than even the cosmic dust. In the use of our free will, we actualize those ideas, sometimes with astonishing beauty or courage; other times, appallingly badly: but any of this is only possible because ideas open our reality and our space of meaning.

Yet, in pursuing Coleridgean ideas, one should think primarily not of higher thoughts in the human mind but of ideas as the interiority of the universe itself, as cousins to light and gravity. He called ideas the correlates of the laws of nature.[13] These 'living and life-producing Ideas … are essentially one with the germinal causes in Nature'.[14] Similarly, the older theological tradition saw the divine ideas as 'at the core of every being … the continual speaking of its imperishable truth … the intelligible form or idea by which God thinks and

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[8] John Henry Muirhead, the last of the British idealists, who included Francis Herbert Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet, presented a full-length portrait in *Coleridge as Philosopher* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930). That work and Owen Barfield's comprehensive *What Coleridge Thought* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972) remain valuable introductions to Coleridge the thinker, Muirhead conveying the gravity and Barfield, the excitement.

[9] CN 2 §2598 f80^{v} (May–August 1805).

[10] F 2 104 fn. (28 September 1809); F 1 177 fn.

[11] CL 1 115 (21 October 1794), to Southey; var. LPR 49 (February 1795); and CN 4: §5270 f6 (November 1825).

[12] CN 1 §495 (October 1799); C&S 47 fn.

[13] LL 2 147–8 and F 1: 497 n.2 (autograph note, Copy D, 23 June 1829).

[14] LL 2 222 (10 March 1818, London Philosophical Society, Fleet Street).

creates each being'.[15]

A practical value in reading Coleridge's prose today lies in his facing the problems of dichotomy in current affairs and our tendency to believe that one position necessarily excludes the other in what he called 'the errors of party spirit'.[16] In his thinking that tendency is overtaken by an inherently mediatory trichotomy, dropping the tug-of-war rope and replacing binary-opposed twos with more spacious threes, to triangulate a more copious area where mere disputation gives way to reasoning.[17] At this familiar point, and since 'to think at all is to theorize',[18] let's allow that logic to clear a better access into the trickier but similarly shaped metaphysics of dynamic idealism and the arising and evolution of matter from ideal powers.

What is particularly exciting in Coleridge is how he saw those ideas as fundamental to and preceding the physical existence of the universe. Here, ideas in their most rarefied sense overlap on the page with hard-nosed senses of matter.Yet how does metaphysics, which the analytic philosophers dismissed as a non-subject, fit with his thoughts about physical forces and the extended material world? While the language of modern science—of materiality, quantity, extension, and externality—has been a remarkable development, the complementary language of intentionality, quality, intensity, and interiority has diminished. Like G. W. Hegel, Friedrich Schelling, and William Blake, Coleridge was impressed by Jakob Boehme's systemic yet ever-shifting attempts to describe a metaphysics that sees all materiality, evolution, and outer existence as an emergence from a deeper, anterior interiority and a dynamic of fluxional powers.

Coleridge's idealism was not that easily parodied variant, subjective idealism, which doubts that a tree in front of your eyes, your own hand before your face, or even your face and eyes themselves, are real beyond anyone's sensations of them. Unlike subjective idealists and radical empiricists, he did not deny the existence of matter. Instead, he saw matter arising at the intermediate level of his cosmic scheme. Physicality (*natura naturans*) is the intermediate level nested between 'Supreme Reality' and the level of materiality and phenomena (*natura naturata*). Rather than think of these as separate levels—Coleridge believed in 'religious Intercommunion between Man & his Maker' and that the transcendent light shone in the darkness[19]—they can be imagined as internally nested matryoshka and babushka dolls. Supreme Reality, the eternally primordial divine will, is the level where physical forces arise and divine ideas and cosmic powers descend and become actualized,[20] while phenomenality, in a trichotomous process, is the ever-evolving level produced by syntheses of

[15] Mark A. Mackintosh, *The Divine Ideas Tradition in Christian Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2.

[16] F 1 205.

[17] M 5 459–60 (1821).

[18] F II 124.

[19] CN 3 4017 (1810); CN 5 §6921 (May 1830) et alibi, alluding to John 1:5.

[20] CN 5 §5816 f43 (March 1828). For Coleridge's trichotomy of reality, see CN 5 §5143 (March–May 1824), CN 4: §§4784 (1820–1), and 5143 (March–May 1824).

opposed forces. Material existence is, in this view, a boxers' embrace of opposed powers. As Coleridge prompted, 'what is Matter but, the synthesis of its essential component Powers, Attraction and Repulsion?'[21] That is, matter is the product of a confluence of opposed forces: a 'coagulation' or respite of opposed energies. Outlining how opposed dynamisms lock into temporary stasis and produce matter in a suspension of energies, he explained that:

> It is peculiar to the [dynamic] Philosophy … to consider matter as a Product—coagulum spiritûs, the pause, by interpenetration, of opposite energies—and … I hold no matter as real otherwise than as the copula of these energies, consequently no matter without Spirit …[22]

As 'to the construction of matter', he adds, 'we find it as the product, or *tertium aliud* [third other thing], of antagonist powers of repulsion and attraction.'[23] In this thinking he agrees with Kant, who argued that Leibizian 'physical monads are … to be conceived as pointlike centres of attractive and repulsive forces, where the repulsive force, in particular, generates a region of solidity or impenetrability in the form of a tiny "sphere of activity" emanating from a central point'.[24]

For Coleridge, this production of matter is a *product* in the mathematical sense, as distinct from a merely aggregative *sum*. Coleridge saw the x × y of this productive evolution through powers and forces as an alchemy of emergence underlying the new theories in chemistry and biology. This difference between the summative and the productive (the additive and the generative) is the physical equivalent of that between dichotomy and trichotomy in logic. Unlike the sum, the product, for Coleridge, arises through interpenetration as a new entity (the *tertium aliud*), such as a child who is entirely its own person, with qualities both like and different from its parents. This is how he thought potentials become actualized in historical existence, evolving through opposed forces and the clash of accidents, and coaxed beyond themselves (towards their better selves) by universal ideals. This pattern shaped his view of the ideal powers, of reason and goodness, as an ultimately uplifting circle that stoops in order to raise:

> All goodness is refluent, circular in its movement still as it revisits its own source, leaves nothing behind but what is incapable of elevation. And what it cannot elevate, it strengthens and improves.[25]

Coleridge's idealism stays true to what he saw as the profoundest verses in the Bible, taking as its premise the Johannine 'In the beginning was the Word'.[26]

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[21] CM 3 851, *c.*1812–16, notes on Mendelsohn.
[22] CL 4 775 (September 1817), to Charles Tulk; var. CM 5: 545–6, notes on Jeremy Taylor.
[23] 'Theory of Life' (1818), SWF 1: 522.
[24] Kant, *Physical Monadology* (1756), as glossed by Michael Freidman, in his introduction to Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* ([1786] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
[25] OM 149–50.
[26] John 1:1.

This is not the physical, material God of John Milton,[27] for example, but intelligent, compassionate, pre-Incarnational spirit, in which 'we live, and move, and have our being'.[28] This Logos is the mind in which the 'divine ideas' inhere, although the theologically shy can shift this aspect towards a theistically neutral position, such as Iris Murdoch's view of ideas as powerful and universal forms that are ideals and 'magnetic' attractors. For her, 'ideal end-points or Ideas of Reason' are 'the place where the concept of good lives'. "'Good": "Real": "Love", she continues, 'here we retrieve the deep … indefinability of good', which is 'indefinable not for the [trivial] reasons offered by [G. E.] Moore's successors, but because of the infinite difficulty of … apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality'.[29] This view of cosmic ideas is clearly in tune with Coleridge's sense of an interconnected reality of actualizing ideas and idealizing acts, helmed by reason and love.

His 'ideal realism'[30] goes deeper into (though is distinct from) what philosophers since the 1950s term *physicalism* than the outdated metaphysical theory of *materialism* managed. Unlike materialist corpuscularianism, physicalism admits non-material, physical forces (e.g. gravitation and electromagnetism) and universal, physical but non-material laws of nature. What 'physical' means in such contexts is often very metaphysical. Coleridge's argument that ideas and powers precede physical existence is crucial to his view of matter and physical forces. They precede it, that is, but they do not swallow it up or usurp its place: the physical remains real. Relating this to later physics, Coleridge stands with the Einsteinians who maintain the substantial reality of laws of nature, as opposed to those who argue that they are changeable and have no reality beyond the material phenomena that they only appear to order.

Since the twentieth century, physicists have held that matter arises from energy, abandoning the corpuscular materialism that dominated the Enlightenment, Coleridge's time, and much of the later nineteenth century. Rather than caricaturize Coleridge as a Quixotic idealist giving short shrift to matter and embodiedness, it should be recognized that he and related dynamic idealists were almost prepossessed with the origin and nature of matter and physical forces.[31] Those related thinkers include philosophers Ralph Cudworth, G. W. Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and physicists Albert Einstein, who explained the equivalence of matter and energy, Max Planck, and David Bohm, all of whom

[27] CN 4: §§5240 (September 1825) and 5262 (November 1825).

[28] Acts 17:28, citing Epimenides, and cited by Coleridge (following Schelling) at CL 2: 866, BL 1: 184, et alibi.

[29] Iris Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection' (1964), in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 41 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 41.

[30] 'Ideal realism', BL 1: 303. I relate Coleridge's ideal realism in depth to physicalism in a forthcoming book chapter, 'S. T. Coleridge's "Ideal Realism" and the Substance of Nature', outlined at the conference Romantic Realisms: New Materialisms in German Romanticism, Oxford University, 22–3 September 2022.

[31] Explored in my forthcoming edited volume, *Living Ideas: Coleridge and Other Dynamic Idealists on Life and Matter*.

proposed profound theories of matter arising in the interplay of opposed forces.

Coleridge's dynamic accounts of physical existence remain valuable for their sustained thought and flashes of brilliance. Yet his ideal realism could also provide a viable direction in the philosophy of mind as an alternative to currently popular theories of panpsychism ('the thesis that everything is conscious').[32] Contemporary philosophy of mind enters here as it approaches the 'hard problem' of the ontological status of consciousness (what kind of being is it, a thing, a process, a mind?) and the mystery of its arising. As dualism seems to be a dead duck, philosophers have been seeking a monist theory to account for the existence or emergence of consciousness. Panpsychism has gained unexpected traction as it claims that consciousness *just is* a fundamental property of all physical existence. One might imagine the 'eldila' of C. S. Lewis's science-fiction novel *Perelandra* writ universal, those intelligent Martians whose pure state of nature achieves cosmic harmony, and who 'do not eat, breed, breathe, or suffer natural death, and to that extent resemble thinking minerals more than … anything we should recognise as an animal.'[33] Panpsychism in current philosophy, however, does not apportion *thinking* as we know it to every existent; rather, it supposes some primordial quality of mind that it leaves unimagined. In this respect, contemporary panpsychism is closer to Leibniz's metaphysics and its mysteriously perceptive and appetitive monads.

The panpsychist notion also shares ground with Coleridge's earlier views and experiences regarding the universality of vitality and mind, where '"animated Nature", and the inner sense of "universal Life" is matched in mountain rock and waterfalls with … force and sublimity'.[34] Six years later, he still held that the common view of 'earth, air, water, &c as dead' is 'a negation and voluntary act of no-thinking … necessary for our limited powers of Consciousness', while it is 'likewise necessary that at times we should awake & step forward—and this is effected by Poetry & Religion/—. The Extenders of Consciousness'.[35]

The main argument of contemporary panpsychism is that some organisms can have self-consciousness because all matter is in some elementary sense already conscious. It seems to me, however, that one would find longer legs, wings even, on the dynamic theory of matter, of which Coleridge's ideal realism remains an intriguing example. The dynamic theory can more robustly make inroads into the question of how there can be consciousness at all, since it maintains an energic monism where the ideal and the physical are mutually

[32] David Chalmers, 'Panpsychism and Panprotopsychism', *Amherst Lecture in Philosophy*, vol. 8 (2013), 1–35, 1; also e.g. Phillip Goff, 'Panpsychism', in ed. Susan Schneider, and Max Velmans, *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness* (2nd edn; Oxford, 2017), 106–25.

[33] C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (London: The Bodley Head, 1943), 2.

[34] My essay, '"Wild Activity of Thoughts": Associationism and the idea of Life, *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 52 (Winter 2018), 17–26: 24, referring to CL 2 916 (14 January 1803, to Tom Wedgwood).

[35] CN 3 §3632 (13 November 1809).

developed.[36] Dynamic idealism as developed by Coleridge could rival or expand approaches to the hard problem of consciousness by commencing not from matter plus some quality (atoms—or quarks, or gluons—imbued with primal consciousness), but with matter as itself arising from fundamental powers that we identify with mind: desire (conatus, impulse, pressure) and intellect (organization, ratio, harmony). The eventual emergence of consciousness in living organisms would then be the fuller actualization of fundamental powers. And Coleridge held this as occurring throughout the cosmos as the extended world evolves from that 'intense Reality' 'whose choral Echo is the Universe'.[37]

[36] As a developmental, dual-aspect monism, Coleridge's ideal realism shares some ground with the metaphysics of Baruch Spinoza and Leibniz.

[37] CM 1 563, notes on Boehme; BL 2 248.