

Coleridge's Philanthropy:
Poverty, Dissenting Radicalism, and the Language of Benevolence [\[1\]](#)

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1

On the 17th of November, 1795, some citizens of Bristol convened at the Guildhall to congratulate George III on successfully escaping attacks by rioters. A group among those present, however, moved an amendment to beseech him to discontinue the war with republican France for the sake of national peace. The twenty-three-year-old Coleridge was among these pacifists. Their proposal provoked strong objection from Sheriff Joseph Harford, who championed the government's policy, asserting that '*the only way to procure a Peace was by the Sword!*' [\[2\]](#) He pronounced the Establishment's view of the war as a just and necessary crusade to preserve the Anglican Church. [\[3\]](#) According to the *Star*, Harford's declamation was received with groans and hisses by the 'society of Jesus' (probably referring to Bristol Dissenters, who regarded the war as a transgression of Christian morality). After this short disturbance, the young Coleridge launched an 'elegant' and 'sublime' address (*LPR*, 361):

"A Gentleman...has spoken of his love of Peace, and of his abhorrence of the society of JESUS, who propagated principles diametrically opposite to the doctrines of Jesus; but in what page of his blessed gospel did that Gentleman learn, that *the way to procure peace was by the Sword.*" Surely not in that passage "*If a man smite thee on the one cheek, thou shalt turn the other also.*" (361)

To Coleridge, a war under the name of Jesus was an absurd 'blasphemy', as he wrote in 'Religious Musings' (l. 191). It contradicted not only the words of Christ, but his spirit and deeds of charity as described in the Gospel. Coleridge's concern was with the state of the poor, whose lives were most at stake in the war-strained economy: 'a PENNY taken from the pocket of a poor man might deprive him of a dinner' (*LPR*, 361). Pacifism and philanthropy were of a kind in Coleridge's early political discourse.

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Coleridge's early pacifism was a reverberation of the anti-war campaign carried out by radical Dissenters. As indicated in the title of J. H. William's tract, *War the Stumbling-block of a Christian; Or, the Absurdity of Defending Religion by the Sword* (1795), the war appeared to them as an abjuration of Christian belief. [\[4\]](#) Coleridge's underlying ideas, however, were not confined to the framework of Unitarian doctrines: preaching the Gospel to improve morality among the poor was a cross-denominational phenomenon in the late eighteenth century. Dissenters in general and even some Anglican clergymen were awakened by the importance of their evangelical duties. Coleridge reflected their mounting enthusiasm for Christian missions:

Go, preach the Gospel to the Poor. The disciples of Christ were commanded to proclaim good Tidings to All Men; but their zeal was directed more particularly to the Poor,

because being oppressed they wanted comfort, being ignorant they wanted knowledge, and being simple in lowliness they were likely to receive the Gospel and preserve it in purity. (LPR, 195)

Despite Coleridge's public persona as a Unitarian radical, the zeal with which he proclaimed 'Preach the Gospel to the Poor', more resembles that of the Methodist John Wesley, who had, after all, started his long Evangelical career by preaching to the distressed labourers of Bristol in 1739. In Wesleyan Methodists, Coleridge saw one of the essential qualities of a philanthropist, who, he wrote, 'should be *personally* among the Poor, and teach them their *Duties*' (LPR 43).^[5] By adding 'the views of the Philosopher' as another essential qualification for a philanthropist (ibid.), Coleridge narrowly preserved an alliance with Rational Dissenters, who admitted the importance of religious enthusiasm and yet insisted on 'disciplining' it within the boundary of reason.^[6]

Coleridge's involvement with Dissenting radicalism has been much discussed, but little attention has been paid to these philanthropic concerns as seen in his discourse on poverty. Philanthropy would continue to be an important theme throughout Coleridge's life, and if we are to understand what happened to his radicalism, we need to examine the background and ramifications of his philanthropic ideas which supported and survived his radical career. Carl Woodring suggested in 1961 that Coleridge's 'Unitarian religion and his republicanism united in aims and language of sympathy, pity,

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and universal fraternity'.^[7] There certainly was a link between republicanism and Unitarianism, and, as John Morrow and Peter Kitson respectively show, Coleridge derived his radical rhetoric from the critiques of property and government in the tradition of 'civic humanism' as well as from the Commonwealthan discourses of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Nonconformists.^[8] Nicholas Roe, with impeccable detail, substantiates the Unitarian matrix which served to shape Coleridge's early discourse, and goes further to point out the significant influence which Coleridge received from George Dyer's idea of benevolence.^[9] Coleridge's philanthropic ideas, however, need a more careful examination. During the 1790s, the language of 'benevolence' and discourses on poverty underwent a process of conflict and interactive transfiguration.^[10] This historical context gave Coleridge's writings some ambiguous elements which had their ideological roots neither in republicanism nor in the 'enlightened' religion of the Unitarians. As the *Critical Review* noted accurately on his *Moral and Political Lecture* in 1795, Coleridge's radical discourse was 'rather defective in point of precision': we hear him talking about principles, but he suddenly disappears before he shows us 'some fixed and determinate principles of action'.^[11]

Nor would it be correct to assume that Coleridge's early Unitarian faith was simply a virulent infection, or in his words, 'ebullitions of youthful disputatiousness' (CL, 1: 125), cured gradually and notably as he progressed towards Anglican Trinitarianism. The continued seriousness of Coleridge's attitude towards the poor, as we see in *Lay Sermons*, belies such a negative view. In 1816 he described his former Unitarian beliefs with self-contempt as '*psilanthropism*', the assertion of Christ's mere humanity; but he added that he could never recollect those earlier days 'with either shame or regret', for he had been 'most sincere, most disinterested!'^[12] If he had followed Unitarians in denying the divinity of Christ, it was because he had viewed Jesus as an 'inspired Philanthropist' (LPR, 248), a man of charity inspired by the omnipotent benevolence of God. What is most characteristic of Coleridge is not the incompleteness of his action or discourse, but the heterogeneity of his philosophy

resulting from what Thomas McFarland calls ‘reticulation’—an attempt to establish as many interconnections as possible between different

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modes of activity, literary, theological, metaphysical, and, I would like to add, ‘political’.^[13]

In what follows, I argue that philanthropy was the key concept which linked Coleridge with the radical religion of Unitarians; but I hope to show at the same time that the heterodoxy of his philosophical ideas inevitably caused his gradual defection from their politico-religious principles, with which he sought to harmonise his language. By philanthropy, I do not mean the practice of charity, but rather the attitudes and ideas with which Coleridge and Rational Dissenters alike pursued an ideal vision of human welfare. Coleridge himself rarely used the term, but a study of his philanthropic ideas will help us understand how his reticulated philosophy eventually caused the disintegration of his radical persona.

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Coleridge was initiated into Unitarianism at Cambridge, chiefly by William Frend, a fellow of Jesus College and a professed Unitarian with liberal opinions in politics and religion.^[14] While persuading his anxious brother of Frend’s harmlessness, Coleridge could not help intimating that he was no longer steady with the self-indulgent belief in the Anglican orthodoxy.^[15] A year later Coleridge was among the enthusiastic supporters of Frend, when his tutor was prosecuted at the University Court on a charge of sedition concerning his new publication *Peace and Union* (1793).^[16] The chief tenet of Frend’s tract was rather a reconciliation of radical and conservative principles, envisaging gradual social amelioration through legislative reforms. With the spirit of Christian charity, he proposed a tax-reform plan which involved paternal care by the rich to the poor according to ‘the beautiful gradations of nature’ on a local scale.^[17] This would have been acceptable to many readers; the prosecution against him was incurred only because of a pro-regicide passage in the Appendix.^[18] We cannot prove exactly to what extent Frend moulded Coleridge’s Unitarian radicalism, but it is safe to say that his presence and prosecution at Cambridge taught Coleridge the meaning of a Dissenting religion during this politically turbulent period.

We can detect a personal reason for Coleridge’s precipitous enthrallment with Unitarianism. Coleridge at Cambridge was vacillating in ‘a kind of *religious Twilight*’ between evangelical sensibility and ‘Deistic Philosophy’ (*CL*, 1: 78). While his heart was ‘tremblingly alive to the feelings of humanity’ and admired

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Jesus and the ‘Holiness in the Gospel’, his ‘Reason’ was inclined towards the ‘subtlety of Argument’ in the work of Enlightenment authors, such as Voltaire and Helvetius (78). Before his involvement with Dissenting radicalism, he had no means to solve the inner discord of his sensibility, intellect, and religious faith. Hence his existential crisis. After his miserable escapade in a dragoon regiment, he confessed to his brother that ‘Scepticism had mildewed my hope in the Saviour’: with all his faith in ‘the Truth of revealed Religion’, he found himself ‘still farther from a steady Faith’ (65). He was desperately in need of ‘True and active Faith’ and of the ‘Comforter’ who would console his weakened soul (65). Unitarian radicalism apparently supplied this ‘active faith’. In the spring of 1796, Coleridge was still trying to hold on to the ‘active faith’ of the Unitarians:

I therefore go, and join head, heart, and hand,
Active and firm, to fight the bloodless fight
Of science, freedom, and the truth in Christ.

(‘Reflections on having left a place of retirement’, ll. 60-2)

This passage is, in effect, a manifesto of Unitarian radicalism, upholding an enlightened, unsentimental ‘practical piety’ towards a Divine Being, who operates the law of necessity towards the progress of civilisation.^[19] Coleridge’s emotional piety could not, however, keep up with this hard-headed, ‘active’ faith very long.

It was Southey who guided Coleridge from the state of ‘religious twilight’ into the daylight of radical politics. Coleridge’s letters suddenly and explicitly became charged with political ambition after his first acquaintance with Southey in the summer of 1794. Even though Southey himself was not a Unitarian, his pro-Dissenting views and puritanical moral uprightness awakened Coleridge’s socio-political consciousness to reassess the political implications of his religion and to find a model in the radical faith of Unitarians.

Coleridge’s concern with philanthropy was developed initially in the course of his correspondence with Southey. In his first letter to Southey, written on his walking tour with Joseph Huck, Coleridge toasted ‘Republicanism’ and regretfully told how harshly his companion was repelled by a beggar who poked her nose into their dinner table at an inn; ‘it is *impertinent & obtrusive*—I am a Gentleman’ (CL, 1: 83): Coleridge took Huck’s ‘unfeeling Remarks’ to illustrate the vicious influence of the ‘lingering Remains of Aristocracy’ upon charitable, humane feelings (84). He was convinced of the urgent necessity of ‘aspheterisation’, equalisation of ‘the Bounties of Nature’ (84), which, he believed, would not only eradicate destitution from society, but also attain ‘a *moral Sameness*’ (163). For Southey, aspheterisation was

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associated with the republican virtue of fraternity, as he told his friend Bedford in a solemn manner: ‘when thou hast once seen the aspheterizing system realized, thou wilt gladly fraternize with us’.^[20] This was the principle which the two poets attempted to install at the centre of their Pantisocracy project. Though the scheme was later to suffer from the misunderstanding of principles between them, it initiated Coleridge’s political career as a philanthropist.^[21] Whilst Southey depended on Godwin and Rousseau for a theoretical basis for ‘aspheterisation’, Coleridge derived his utopian vision mainly from the principles of primitive Christian communism, as indicated by Jesus’s admonishment: Jesus ‘forbids to his disciples all property—and teaches us that accumulation is incompatible with their Salvation’ (LPR, 226).^[22] Just as the sight of a hunger-bitten girl inspired Wordsworth towards republican ideals,^[23] the encounter with a beggar thus invoked for Coleridge the vision of a poverty-free society. The reality of social evils converted him into a philanthropist with ample political imagination.

Southey and Coleridge continued their epistolary discussion in search of an ideal virtue which would serve to attain social and moral amelioration. Probably Southey was the first to direct attention to the eighteenth-century idea of benevolence. In his reply to Southey, while touching on the catastrophe of Poland, Coleridge used the term ‘philanthropy’ as an important moral attitude for social improvement:

The ardour of private Attachments makes Philanthropy a necessary habit of the Soul. I love my Friend—such as he is, all mankind are or might be! The deduction is evident—Philanthropy (and indeed every other Virtue) is a thing of Concretion—Some home-

born Feeling in the centre of the Ball, that, rolling on thro' Life collects and assimilates every congenial Affection. (CL, 1: 86)

The word 'philanthropy' here has more strongly religious, and politically complicated implications than the eighteenth-century 'benevolence'. In an intense philosophical debate concerning benevolence during the eighteenth century, Hutcheson's optimistic belief in the human capacity for universal benevolence was discredited by Hume, Adam Smith and a number of others,

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who advocated private affection as the primary virtue in human society.^[24] In the above passage, Coleridge took a middle-ground position which located affection at the centre of benevolence, and yet accepted the possibility of universal love. His benevolence, however, was modelled fundamentally on the Biblical notion of the love of neighbour. And in order to expand affection into the love of mankind, he relied on Hartley's theory, which suggests various means by which a man can develop his sympathetic affections into 'pure disinterested Benevolence' through the system of association.^[25] By thus reconciling private love with universal benevolence, Coleridge could be led to accept the rationalised Unitarian belief in God's 'strong controlling Love', without suppressing his poetic sensibility ('Religious Musings', l. 58).

Moreover, the term 'philanthropy', which originally meant 'love of mankind' and often 'an action for public good', became an active political virtue during this period, referring specifically to the principles of general enlightenment and amelioration leading up to universal happiness. With their strong belief in human reason, Rational Dissenters tended to remove sentimental elements from the eighteenth-century notion of benevolence.^[26] For Mary Wollstonecraft, 'natural affection' was not 'pampered sensibility', but 'rational affections' cultivated only by 'reason'.^[27] And Price upheld universal benevolence as 'a just and rational principle of action' which would aim disinterestedly at the general happiness of human society through a reform of established political institutions.^[28] The virtue of benevolence was thus restructured into a new active virtue of 'universal benevolence', which C.B. Jones terms as 'radical sensibility'.^[29]

This active sensibility provided the basis of all the philanthropic visions of radical Dissenters. It involved both sympathy towards the poor and a reform of human institutions; the civil discrimination Dissenters faced and their hostility to the Established Church inevitably evoked their sympathy towards those who were equally repressed by a seemingly inequitable government. Their view of poverty as a sign of misgovernment stood against the conciliatory view of destitution as a blessed state of sinlessness, as in Paley's *Reasons of Contentment* and in Hannah More's *Village Politics*, which were disseminated by John Reeves' Association as apologies of the Establishment. In *The Complaints of the Poor People in England* (1793), Dyer made some innovative suggestions to ameliorate the plight of the poor, and continued in

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his 1795 tract to put forward his definition of 'a philanthropist' as an 'independent Being' whose 'benevolence' involves 'moral persuasion' and 'rational conviction'.^[30] He even expressed the extreme view that theological opinions were not essential for producing 'the milk of philanthropy' in human mind.^[31] While attacking an unreflecting kind of 'charity', Godwin also argued that 'philanthropy' should consist principally in 'a change of sentiments

and dispositions' among the whole members of a society.^[32] To the *Anti-Jacobin*, this visionary, theoretically-oriented philanthropy appeared as absurd and impracticable. The review therefore called Paine 'the philanthropist' with a tone of mockery, and caricatured both Jacobins and reformers as a 'Friend of Humanity' contemptuously kicking out a squalid knife-grinder who would not understand his 'Republican enthusiasm and universal philanthropy'.^[33]

Coleridge shared a critical awareness of the increasing national distress with Unitarians, such as Priestley, Gilbert Wakefield, and William Roscoe, who demanded immediate peace for the sake of national welfare, upholding the supremacy of Christian universal love over the Establishment's anti-Jacobinism. Though his facetious essay 'On Fasts' provoked even Dissenters, Coleridge generally assimilated the rhetoric of these eloquent radical pacifists in his discourse on poverty:

But alas! the storm which they raise, falls heaviest on the unprotected Innocent: and the Cottage of the poor Man is stripped of every Comfort, before the Oppressors, who send forth the mandate of Death, are amerced in one Luxury or one Vice. (LPR, 65)

Coleridge's language is what Wakefield calls the language of Christ, that is, 'the language...of poignant sympathy, of disinterested emotion, of compassionate distress'.^[34] As a *psilanthropist*, he followed Jesus Christ in trying to save the souls of the distressed, while attacking what he saw as the corrupt and repressive authorities.

Coleridge's definition of philanthropy, however, contradicted radical philanthropy. It not only refused to rationalise the eighteenth-century virtue of benevolence, but also it remained both politically and religiously less radical than it is alleged to be. For Coleridge, universal benevolence was to be 'begotten and rendered permanent by social and domestic affections' (LPR, 46). 'Jesus knew our Nature', he wrote, 'and that expands like the circles of a Lake—the Love of our Friends, parents and neighbours lead[s] us to the love of our Country to the love of all Mankind' (163). He drew on a passage in the

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Bible in order to describe how a Christian is led from brotherly kindness 'to the height of disinterested Virtue' and of moral perfection (CL, 1. 283; 2 Peter, 1: 5-7). Human love thus expands towards the ideal sphere of divine goodness and secures infinite happiness in the love of God through the process of self-annihilation:

All self-annihilated it shall make
God its Identity: God all in all!
We and our Father one! ('Religious Musings', ll. 43-5)

The sense of a universal unity 'fraternizes' men and 'constitutes / Our charities and bearings', and it is Christ's 'sacred sympathy' that elevates a self towards the 'whole one self', 'Oblivious of its own, / Yet all of all possessing' (ll. 129-30, 153-4, 156-7). And Coleridge sought to attain true 'Faith' through this self-immersion in God's divine love, even though he knew that he could not reach the ultimate vision of 'Truth' (ll. 157, 396).

The pantheistic notion of God's love as immanent was shared by Priestley and other Unitarians, but Coleridge adapted it in his own way. In a draft of a sermon which he gave for Joshua Toulmin at Taunton, we hear him talking about the love of God and about the need of education among the poor, in particular, through Sunday school, then a popular institution among Evangelicals (LPR, 355). He then repeated his emotional system of philanthropy: 'all

our Passions are to be absorbed in the love of God' (352). This view differed from that of Toulmin, who held that the love of Christ represents universal benevolence, but has no 'affection' in it.^[35] Coleridge depended on a Platonic framework for his belief in 'the infinite power of God' (*LPR*, 352), asserting that 'God is a living Spirit, infinitely powerful, wise and benevolent' (208). In 'Religious Musings', while applauding the 'plastic power' of 'Love, omnific, omnipresent Love' rolling infinitely through the mortal world (ll. 405, 415), he even drew on Berkley to represent human life as 'a vision shadowy of Truth' with God hidden behind the 'veiling clouds' (ll. 396, 398). Coleridge thus avoided falling into the optimism and materialism inherent in Unitarian doctrines. His philosophical heterogeneity appears characteristically in this mixture of psilanthropism, pantheism, and Platonism. It was such a pseudo-Unitarian system of 'sacred sympathy' that Coleridge intended to establish in opposition to Godwin's 'proud' philanthropy, which 'denounces every home-born feeling, by which it is produced and nurtured' (*LPR*, 46).^[36] And it foreshadows his later thesis of *ego quia sum* which envisages

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'Self' as absorbed in 'the absolute I AM' (*BL*, 1: 283).

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Coleridgean philanthropy became most distinct from radical philanthropy when these ideas were translated into practical matters. Provoked by Thelwall's scorn of religion, he set out to convince him of the remarkable effects of Christian religion on the ethical improvement of delinquent paupers: 'to preach morals to the virtuous is not quite so requisite, as to preach them to the vicious', because the foremost object of religion is 'to heal the broken-hearted, and give wisdom to the Poor Man' (*CL*, 1: 282). His 'psilanthropist' faith in Jesus as the 'inspired Philanthropist' formed itself in Coleridge's discourse as an evangelical imperative:

"Go, preach the Gospel to the Poor." By its Simplicity it will meet their comprehension, by its Benevolence soften their affections, by its Precepts it will direct their conduct, by the vastness of its Motives ensure their obedience. (*LPR*, 44)

The evangelicalism in this message contravenes the anti-governmental principles of radical philanthropy. Encouragement of obedient habits through emotional and material relief would serve the purpose and effect of philanthropy as conducted by Wesley, or as disseminated through Hannah More's tracts. And Coleridge may have seen no disagreement between himself and More, when he agreed to Southey's original plan to dedicate *The Fall of Robespierre* to her.^[37]

Coleridge's involvement in the Abolitionist movement further illustrates his non-sectarian concern with philanthropic actions. The slave trade had been an imminent public issue for some years before his arrival at Bristol in 1795. Few could remain blind to the marks of this inexorable trade in the city. It was here that the Quaker abolitionist Thomas Clarkson bravely started his investigations and life-long campaign against the hideous trade, whilst the Evangelical William Wilberforce moved abolition bills in Parliament. Coleridge's first interest in the slave trade had been aroused by the 1792 Browne Gold Medal competition at Cambridge, which set the suffering of slaves as a subject. His prize-winning Sapphic ode pictured slaves as groaning and despairing in burning heat and plague, ending with a praise of Wilberforce and a warning of divine punishments traders. Bristol made a crucial contribution in this respect to Coleridge's philanthropic thought.^[38] By the time he gave a lecture on the

slave trade in Bristol in 1795, Coleridge had acquired sufficient information to launch an eloquent attack upon the greedy rich for devastating the bucolic peace of West Indies and African shores and enjoying

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the exotic luxuries ‘unattainable by the poor and labouring part of Society’ (*LPR*, 237). Bleeding slaves were torn from the breast of domestic affections, whilst Britain failed to correct its legislative defects at home. Coleridge’s spirit of Christian humanitarianism is shown in his admonishing of ‘the vanity of pretended Sensibility’ among unconcerned Christians (246) and of hot-tempered radicals lacking true ‘Benevolence’ (249). The spirit is also reflected in Southey’s anti-slavery poems of 1797, which equally installed Christian conscience at the heart of his philanthropy.^[39]

Coleridge’s philanthropy was also free from partisan interests in its encouragement of private charity. His stress on spontaneous sympathy implied an approval of voluntary charity, but he rejected the traditional view of alms-giving as a means of salvation. Nor did he endorse either the heartless, ‘law-forced’ charity administered by the Poor Laws (‘Religious Musings’, l. 288) or the sentimental almsgiving intended to relieve one’s own pain at the sight of paupers. In the fifth issue of *The Watchman*, Coleridge highly recommended Count Rumford’s *Essays, Political, Economical, and Philosophical* (1796), which testified to the fact that voluntary charity prevented the desperate poor in Bavaria from committing crimes and vices. And Coleridge observed that alms-giving should not be motivated by such sentiments as ‘pity’ and ‘compassion’, but by ‘benevolence’ which springs ‘from a more noble origin’ (*W*, 179). For him, charity was best directed ‘towards the majority with loving kindness and submission preserving among themselves a perfect Equality’ (*LPR*, 195).

Coleridge’s encouragement of alms-giving is to be contrasted with Unitarian philanthropy, which traditionally emphasises ‘head’ rather than ‘heart’.^[40] With their emphasis on individual moral capacities and with their animosity towards the Establishment, Unitarian radicals tended to refuse indiscriminate alms-giving and at the same time opposed the Poor-Law relief, on the grounds that both of these systems had been undermining the spirits of independence and industry among paupers. Dyer attacked the ‘philanthropy that attends public charities’ for being ‘selfishness in disguise’.^[41] Price set a high value on self-dependence and industry of the poor rather than on charities.^[42] While admitting some merits of paternalism, Priestley argued that a spirit of commerce could co-operate with the principles of Christianity: he thus protected the interests of his Unitarian congregations, who consisted mainly of wealthy middle classes engaged in trade and industry.^[43] Coleridgean philanthropy collided with the interests of Unitarians, who were later to ally

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with Benthamite utilitarians and promote political economy. It was probably to this calculating, ‘cold beneficence’ of Rational Dissent as well as of the law-regulated relief, that Coleridge referred in ‘Reflections on having left a place of retirement’ (l. 54). After admiring the arduous philanthropy of John Howard, the prison reformer, he wrote:

And he that works me good with unmoved face,
Does it but half: he chills me while he aids,
My benefactor, not my brother man! (‘Reflections’, ll. 51-3)

Self-dependence and industry could not be seen as commendable virtues by the immensely dependent poetic genius. Coleridge's ideal was charity rising impulsively and spontaneously from within in harmony with divine benevolence.

Wordsworth also regarded alms-giving as the most effective and natural mode of relief.^[44] In 1798, he represented the beneficent power of sympathy in the figure of an old silent beggar, but it was through Coleridge that Wordsworth learnt of the Hartleyan psychological process through which sympathy might be transformed into habitual benevolence:

Where'er the aged Beggar takes his rounds,
The mild necessity of use compels
To acts of love; and habit does the work
Of reason, yet prepares that after joy
Which reason cherishes. And thus the soul,
By that sweet taste of pleasure unpursued
Doth find itself insensibly disposed
To virtue and true goodness. ('Old Cumberland Beggar', ll. 90-7)

The Beggar functions not just as the centripetal axis of 'sympathy' in a community, but as the incarnation of 'the benignant law of heaven' (l. 160) with which the villagers harmonise themselves through charity. In parallel with the Coleridgean dynamism between human love and omnipotent God, this Wordsworthian genial correspondence between human sympathy and benevolent Nature was designed to counteract both the Poor-Law administration and the rigorous rationalism of Unitarian philanthropy.

Even in the mid-1790s, a new mode of language was required to represent the Romantic philanthropy in contrast to other types of philanthropy, radical, utilitarian, and bureaucratic. Emphasis on natural sympathy endowed the Romantic poets with the imaginative power to arrest the inner sufferings of the distressed, which elucidated Coleridge's 'gospel' to

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the poor in contrast with the abstract argument of Rational Dissent. In his 'Ode to the Departing Year' (1796), Coleridge acutely perceived the 'toil of death' that would agonise a soldier on the war-field (l. 112). Such empathy towards war victims adds a humane note to his anti-war discourse. In 'Destiny of Nations' (1796), he vividly represented calamities through the eyes of the charitable Jesus-like heroine. In *The Watchman*, he drew on Southey's passage in *Joan of Arc* (1796) to illustrate the 'untold misery' of inarticulate casualties:

...At her cottage door
The wretched one shall sit, and with dim eye
Gaze o'er the plain, where, on his parting steps,
Her last look hung. Nor ever shall she know
Her husband dead, but tortured with vain hope
Gaze on—then heartsick turn to her poor babe,
And weep it fatherless! (*Watchman*, 45)

The passage bears a striking resemblance to Margaret's grief in Wordsworth's *Ruined Cottage* (1797-98) and shares a pathos with another anti-war narrative of his, *Salisbury Plain*, originally written in 1793-94. This exemplifies what T. W. Laqueur terms the 'humanitarian narrative' which relies on details of affliction 'as the sign of truth', demanding 'Christian

mercy' and ameliorative actions as a moral imperative.^[45] With Southey and Wordsworth, Coleridge aimed to create a new type of discourse which dealt with the sufferings of the poor in a way that would appeal to the reader's sentiment and imagination and would motivate them towards personal acts of kindness.^[46] These Romantic poets looked at the problem of poverty 'from within', whilst Unitarians and utilitarians strove to solve it from 'without'.^[47]

Coleridge's sympathetic imagination, in particular, was deepened by his own inner existential problem. In 'Effusion XXXV', an early version of 'The Aeolian Harp', he presents a kind of *hortus classicus* in which strings of sentiments and thoughts are animated by the 'one intellectual Breeze' towards 'Th'INCOMPREHENSIBLE' (ll. 39, 51), but he cannot help intimating his inner anxiety when he 'inly feels' the healing power of God (l. 52):

Who with his saving mercies healed me,
A sinful and most miserable man
Wilder'd and dark. (ll. 53-5)

The later image of Coleridge in dejection is already perceptible. The sudden darkening of the Edenic vision reveals the crucial dichotomy from which

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Coleridge's philanthropy suffered between vision and action, religion and politics, poetry and radicalism. The morbid, somewhat pathetic, yet potentially sublime piety characterises the basis of Coleridge's philanthropy—a philanthropy which relieves and cures afflictions from within while aspiring after the ideal unity with benevolent God through poetic discourse. And it was this piety and philanthropy that Coleridge reconstructed in 1798 in the figure of the agonised Ancient Mariner, who is redeemed from the state of life-in-death when he blesses the water snakes 'unaware' ('The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', l. 279). The 'spring of love' gushing spontaneously from the heart is the essence of Coleridgean philanthropy: it is a self-annihilating 'sacred sympathy' absorbed in the love of God which not only provides the basis of personal charity, but also redeems the anguished soul from purgatorial suffering. At Bristol, however, the dissonance between his Christian belief and the radicalism of Dissenting politics became intolerably acute. In July, 1797, he confessed to J. P. Estlin: 'I am wearied with politics, even to soreness.—I never knew a passion for politics exist for a long time without swallowing up, or absolutely excluding a passion for Religion' (CL, 1: 338). Coleridge's philanthropy failed to comply with the politics of the Unitarian 'active' benevolence.

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Coleridge's philanthropy certainly exemplifies a Romantic Ideology which replaces history with poetic visions, but it does not imply his withdrawal from politics. He pursued with Unitarian radicals the vision of universal happiness in harmony with God's omnipotent benevolence; but his special emphasis on spontaneous affection distinguished his philanthropy from the rationalised philanthropy of Dissenting radicals. His own inner affliction and anxieties restrained him from such devotion to rationality: his sympathy was naturally directed towards the afflicted hearts of the destitute. With Wordsworth's poems, Coleridgean philanthropy constituted what is to be called 'Romantic philanthropy', stressing the importance of human affection and social sympathy in an imaginative discourse on poverty, especially in opposition both to the radical mode of social reform and to the bureaucratic mode of public relief.

Towards the end of the 1790s, Romantic philanthropy was confronted by its most formidable enemies, Malthusianism and Benthamite utilitarianism, both of which encouraged the virtues of industry and self-dependence within the framework of political economy and were therefore accepted largely by Unitarians in the early nineteenth century. The two groups combined forces to promote a laissez-faire economy, whilst providing the rationale for the Poor Law Amendment of 1834, which sought to confine paupers as social nuisance within the workhouse. Coleridge reacted fiercely against Malthus's

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unsympathetic attitude towards the poor as soon as his essay on population came out.^[48] Wordsworth also expressed a fervent objection to the new Poor Law in the Postscript to *Yarrow Revisited* (1835). While envisaging personal charity as the most effective Christian charity, Coleridge continuously stood against the demoralised philanthropy of political economists which derived its economic principles primarily from Adam Smith in pursuit of the material wealth of the nation. For Coleridge, it was 'well-being', rather than 'wealth', that counted most in human welfare, as he attempted to clarify in such works as *Lay Sermons* and *On the Constitution of the State and the Church*. Coleridge's dissension from the radical politics cannot simply be reduced into a 'disenchanted conservatism'.^[49] Nor did his ideal philanthropy lie in the system of eighteenth-century paternalism; it sought to solve modern social problems upon religiously and politically more comprehensive principles. Coleridge's discourse during the 1790s had philanthropy as its central theme, encompassing the entire spheres of politics, philosophy, religion and poetry. His language of benevolence remained heterodox in the context of Dissenting radicalism.

NOTES:

[1] I would like to thank Dr. Seamus Perry of the University of Glasgow, and Ms. Joanna Innes of Somerville College, Oxford, for their helpful advice and encouragement in the early stages of this research.

[2] The *Star*, 17 November 1795, as quoted in S. T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion*, eds. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971) 361, hereafter cited as *LPR* with page number(s) in parentheses.

[3] See Coleridge's criticism of the Duke of Portland's defence of the French war as a necessary measure to preserve 'the Christian Religion', in a note to line 159 of 'Religious Musings', *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997) 475-76. References to Coleridge's poems are hereafter based on this edition.

[4] J. E. Cookson examines the historical significance of Unitarians' anti-war movement in *Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England 1793-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1982).

[5] Coleridge admired Methodists' success in inculcating sobriety and industry among the poor. *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) 13, hereafter cited as *W*. Coleridge's positive view of Wesley's Evangelical Revival is emphasised by Frederick Gill, *The Romantic Movement and Methodism: A Study of English Romanticism and the Evangelical Revival* (London: Epworth Press, 1937) 161-63. Though generally ambivalent about Methodism, Southey also quotes Wesley's words of philanthropic

fervour in his *The Life of Wesley and the Rise and Progress of Methodism* (London: Frederick Warne, 1889): 'I love the poor. . . . If I might choose, I should still, as I have done, preach the gospel to the poor' (261-2).

[6] Jon Mee shows that Coleridge and rational Dissenters were equally obsessed with anxieties about the kind of religious enthusiasm invoked by Richard Brothers and Richard Lee, in 'Anxieties of Enthusiasm: Coleridge, Prophecy, and Popular Politics in the 1790s', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 60 (1998): 196-97.

[7] Carl Woodring, *Politics in the Poetry of Coleridge* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1961) 14.

[8] John Morrow, *Coleridge's Political Thought: Property, Morality and the Limits of Traditional Discourse* (London: Macmillan, 1990) 19-31. P. J. Kitson, "'The electric fluid of truth': The Ideology of the Commonwealthsman in Coleridge's *The Plot Discovered*", in P. J. Kitson and T. N. Corns (eds.), *Coleridge and the Armoury of the Human Mind: Essays on his Prose Writings* (London: Frank Cass, 1991) 36-62.

[9] Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) Chapt.3: *The Politics of Nature: Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 27-30. G. M. Ditchfield examines Rational Dissenters' philanthropy from a historical viewpoint in his recent article, but Coleridge is significantly excluded from his discussion. 'English Rational Dissent and Philanthropy, c.1760-c.1810', Hugh Cunningham and Joanna Innes (eds.), *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform: From the 1690s to 1850* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998) 193-207.

[10] For general political implications of rhetoric and language during this period, I am indebted to Olivia Smith, *The Language of Politics, 1790-1818* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

[11] *The Critical Review*, 13 (1795): 455.

[12] *Biographia Literaria: or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, eds. James Engell and W. J. Bate, 2vols. (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1984) 1: 180, hereafter cited as *BL* with volume and page numbers in parentheses.

[13] Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) xl.

[14] Roe, *Radical Years*, 84-110.

[15] *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-69) 1: 20, hereafter cited as *CL* with volume and page numbers in parentheses.

[16] Henry Gunning, *Reminiscences of the University, Town, and Country of Cambridge, from the Year 1780*, 2vols. (London, 1854) 1: 299-300, as quoted by Roe, *Radical Years*, 108.

[17] Willam Frend, *Peace and Union* (St. Ives, 1793) 20.

[18] Frend, 47-8.

[19] For the characteristics of Unitarian rational piety, see R. K. Webb, 'Practical Piety', in Knud Haakonsen (ed.), *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996) 287-311.

[20] Robert Southey, *New Letters*, ed. Kenneth Curry, 2vols. (New York: Columbia U.P., 1965) 1: 62.

[21] For Coleridge's political and poetical critique of Southey, see L. D. Pratt, 'The Literary Career of Robert Southey 1794-1800', 2 parts, D.Phil Thesis, Oxford University (1998) Part 1, 73-9.

[22] The emigration of Priestley weighed heavily in Coleridge's mind. The exiled Unitarian minister at this time had an optimistic vision of 'a large settlement for the friends of liberty' in America. *Memoir of Dr. Joseph Priestley, to the Years of 1795* (London, 1807)

126. Coleridge was excited at Dyer's suggestion that Priestley would be interested in the Pantisocracy project (CL, 1: 98) and advised Southey to read *Some Information respecting America* (London, 1794) by Thomas Cooper, Priestley's son-in-law (CL, 1: 115), which presented an idealised picture of the equal society in America: 'There are no men of great rank, nor many of great riches. Nor have the rich there the power of oppressing the less rich, for poverty, such as in Great Britain, is almost unknown' (53).

[23] *The Prelude* (1805), Bk. 9, ll. 511-34, *The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1984). Wordsworth's poems are hereafter cited from this edition.

[24] For this philosophical debate and its influence on the radical literature of the 1790s, see Evan Radcliffe, 'Revolutionary Writing, Moral Philosophy, and Universal Benevolence in the Eighteenth Century', *History of Ideas*, 54 (1993): 221-40.

[25] David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*, 2vols. (London, 1749) 1: 474.

[26] Sentimental benevolence provided the moral basis for impulsive almsgiving, as described in Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* and Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*. See Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986) Chapt.6; John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sensibility: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 118-22, 190-94; G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) 258-62.

[27] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (London, 1790) 5-6, 91.

[28] Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* (London, 1789) 6-7.

[29] C. B. Jones, *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s* (London: Routledge, 1993). See also Radcliffe, 233-40.

[30] George Dyer, *A Dissertation on the Theory and Practice of Benevolence* (London, 1795) 5, 8.

[31] Dyer, *Dissertation*, 19.

[32] *Enquiry concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness*, 2vols. (1793; Spelsbury: Woodstock Books, 1992) 1:202, 2: 798. For Godwin's associations with Rational Dissent, see Mark Philp's detailed study *Godwin's Political Justice* (London: Duckworth, 1986) Part 1.

[33] *The Anti-Jacobin*, Vol.1 of *Parodies of the Romantic Age*, ed. Graeme Stones (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999) 22, 49.

[34] Gilbert Wakefield, *The Spirit of Christianity, Compared with the Spirit of the Times in Great Britain* (London, 1794) 20.

[35] Joshua Toulmin, Appendix to *Practical Efficacy of the Unitarian Doctrine Considered* (London, 1796) 59-60. Coleridge might well have been even an influential source of ideas among local Dissenters, such as J. P. Estlin, minister at Bristol, who started articulating his emotional faith in God's mercy after his acquaintance with Coleridge. While commending 'a mind fraught with benevolence and compassion', Estlin argued that 'We must believe not only with our heads, but from our hearts'. J. P. Estlin, *Sermon, Designed Chiefly, as a Preservative from Infidelity and Religious Indifference* (Bristol, 1802) 9, 61.

[36] See also W, 18; CL, 1:102. For the intellectual milieu of Coleridge's criticism of Godwin, see Nicola Trott, 'The Coleridge Circle and the "Answer to Godwin"', *Review of English Studies* 41(1990): 212-29.

[37] Robert Southey, *The Life and Correspondence of the late Robert Southey*, ed. C. C. Southey, 6vols. (London, 1849) 1: 217.

[38] James Baum locates Coleridge in the context of the Abolitionist movement in Bristol in *Mind-Forg'd Manacles: Slavery and the English Romantic Poets* (North Haven: Archon Books, 1994) Chapt. 1.

[39] For a critical re-assessment of Southey's abolitionist discourse as expressing a new racism under the guise of Christian universalism, see Alan Richardson, 'Darkness Visible? Race and Representation in Bristol Abolitionist Poetry, 1770-1810', in Tim Fulford and Peter Kitson (eds.), *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998) 143-44.

[40] W. G. Tarrant, 'The Spirit of Unitarian Philanthropy', in J. E. Carpenter (ed), *Freedom and Truth: Modern Views of Unitarian Christianity*,.. (London: Lindsey Press, 1925) 283-328.

[41] Dyer, *Complaints*, 64.

[42] See D. O. Thomas, 'Francis Maseres, Richard Price, and the Industrious Poor', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 4 (1985): 65-82.

[43] Margaret Canovan emphasizes the ambiguity of Priestley's idea on charity, 'Paternalistic Liberalism: Joseph Priestley on Rank and Inequality', *Enlightenment and Dissent* 2 (1983): 23-37.

[44] See 'The Ruined Cottage', ll.153-60, for what Wordsworth saw as the vicious influence of public relief upon agricultural labourers. Garry Harrison strenuously examines Wordsworth's early poems in relation to his involvement in the Poor-Law controversy in *Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse: Poetry, Poverty and Power* (Detroit: Wayne State U.P., 1994).

[45] Thomas Laqueur 'Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative', in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989) 177-78.

[46] In Wordsworth's case, see Roe, *Politics*, 32.

[47] I borrowed J. S. Mill's comparative description of Coleridge and Bentham in his essay on 'Coleridge' in *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, J. S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham, ed. Alan Ryan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) 177.

[48] Coleridge provided marginal notes for Southey's unfavourable review of Malthus's book for the *Annual Review* (1803). See Coleridge's *Marginalia*, Vol.3, eds. H. J. Jackson and George Whalley (London: Routledge, 1992) 805-09, and *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol.1, ed. Katherine Coburn (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957) 1832. According to Thomas Allsop, one of the reasons Coleridge deserted the Unitarian sect was the readiness with which the majority of Unitarians accepted Malthus's thesis. *Letters, Conversations and Recollections of S. T. Coleridge*, 2vols. (London, 1836) 1: 61-2. It is to be noted that Malthus was educated at Wakefield's academy, Warrington, and then by Friend at Jesus College, and kept Unitarian associations when he published *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) through the Unitarian publisher Joseph Johnson.

[49] E. P. Thompson, 'Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon', reprinted in *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age* (Woodbridge: Merlin Press, 1997) 33-74.