

Coleridge's Critical Sympathy with Plato

Ronald C. Wendling

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Coleridge sympathized less with this or that doctrine of Plato than with the attention he paid to 'Facts of mind' as opposed to those of the external world (CL I 260). Coleridge thought our attraction to the material and temporal could impair our vision of inner realities, and Plato sanctioned his resistance to this naturalizing, historicizing inclination. (BL I 107)^[1] But Coleridge equally distrusted a concentration on the inward so exclusive of nature and history that it leaves the mind falsely separated from them. His objections to this excess of spirit are so strong, in fact, as to call into question the extent of his Platonism. Coleridge may not have waxed pale at the 'philosophic draughts' of Platonic thinking at school, as Lamb tells us, but his tolerance of them significantly decreased with age.

The Plato Coleridge encountered at Christ's Hospital was the initiator into spiritual knowledge constructed by the third and fourth-century Neoplatonists: Thomas Taylor's translations of Plotinus, the *Hymns of Orpheus* and Porphyry, along with his commentaries on Iamblichus and Proclus, all appeared between his fifth and seventh years there.^[2] In whatever form Coleridge made his first intoxicating acquaintance with these philosophers, he later declared it developmentally unwholesome (BL I 15-16). Nor does he appear to have undertaken any sustained inquiry into Plato until the spring of 1795 when, after settling in Bristol, he began reading the history of philosophy, the Cambridge Platonists (especially Cudworth), and Joseph Priestley in preparation for his political and religious lectures of that year. Coleridge had perhaps already read some Plato in Greek, or in Latin translations from the Greek, but his references to Plato at this time are still largely filtered through these English expositors.^[3]

These references are sometimes neutral, sometimes critical, but rarely enthusiastic (CN I 49; *SWFI* 28). Given the Lockean bias of Godwin, Hartley and Priestley—the ruling triumvirate of Coleridge's mind at Bristol—this early coolness toward Plato is not surprising. Despite the listless Christian

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orthodoxy of his upbringing, and the rationalism of his Socinian reaction against it, Coleridge's lingering religious enthusiasm forbade rejection of the visionary in Plato. But Coleridge was enough of an empiricist by 1795 to distance himself from a Plato he then saw as departing so far from observed fact as to become resplendently obscure. With Priestley Coleridge insisted that the immaterial truths hidden in the 'dazzle' of Plato's 'fantastic allegory' make his work 'dark with excess of Brightness.' His trinity of Life, Intelligence and the Good, for example, merely over-elaborates the 'plain Truth that God is a living Spirit, infinitely powerful, wise and benevolent' (*LPR* 208-9). Like Burke, Plato mystifies the commonplace with an extravagant rhetoric that can seduce the unwary into accepting the rigidities of his politics. Coleridge declined to question the universal ideas of Plato, whom he calls a 'divine Anti-experimentalist,' but that doctrine insufficiently atones for what he calls Plato's 'crime' of being 'the first Manufacturer of Utopian Commonwealths' (*W* 34).

This distance from Plato, bred into Coleridge by the dissenting politics and religion of his early years, was never to leave him. It sat uneasily, however, with his attraction to the care Plato took with the non-empirical realities of human psychology. Coleridge's 1796 sonnet on returning from Birmingham to Bristol to see his infant firstborn is a case in point. The poem turns on an experience that, as Coleridge writes to his radical friend, John Thelwall, 'if you never

have had yourself, I cannot explain to you' (CL I 260). Unfamiliar images nevertheless dimly remembered sometimes turn a present moment into something strangely dreamlike. Certain it is awake, the mind yet feels asleep and is visited by a disquieting 'Semblance of some Unknown Past,' here the thought of little Hartley's reprieve from an earthly existence to which he had been only briefly sentenced. Coleridge uses the Platonic doctrine of the soul's pre-existence to authorize the intrusion of this unsettling idea into his mind, but does so hesitantly, as though seeking to minimize ridicule from an audience without his taste for transcendental introspection. He calls such recollections mere 'fancies,' for example, and removes direct mention of Plato from the text of his poem to a footnote, where it looks like a scholarly curiosity (CL I 260-61).^[4]

This reluctance to claim kinship with Plato suggests something of the complexity of Coleridge's relationship to the empirically minded audience of his published work, and even his private correspondence. In the same letter to Thelwall in which he asserts his preference for psychology over history, and includes the Platonic fact of mind recorded in the sonnet on first seeing his son, Coleridge nevertheless insists that he has 'read & digested most of the Historical Writers.' Similarly, his affection for 'philosopher-dreamers' like Thomas Taylor—the 'English Pagan' whose revival of Plato and the

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Neoplatonists challenged the empirical assumptions of the age—does not preclude his love of 'useful knowledge' like chemistry. However indifferent to history and external fact his self-defining Platonism may have made him seem to others, Coleridge did not see himself that way. In the portrait he gives of himself in this letter to Thelwall, he is well aware that his dulled countenance and indolent gait indicate an excessive abstraction from this world. But he senses at least a potential energy in his step and accepts, though only on the word of others, that his countenance is 'physiognomically good.' These and other similar passages suggest that Coleridge lived at some distance from his body. He had, along with his admitted interest in history and the external world, a physical vitality and expressiveness that his characteristic concern with the psychological seems to have dampened somewhat. He had lifelong reservations about Plato partly because, whatever his conflicts with the empiricism of his age, he saw in its anti-Platonic comfort with matter and time a possible antidote to his own excessive inwardness.

This need to apologize for his Platonism while asserting it informs Coleridge's well known comment to Thelwall in late 1796: 'I love Plato—his dear *gorgeous* Nonsense' (CL I 295). Impressed by the Lockean spirit of the times, he could not understand the full extent of his opposition to it until he read Plato more seriously and directly than he appears to have done at any earlier stage in his career. This kind of engagement seems to have begun between 9 November and 13 December 1796, just before his move to Nether Stowey, when he borrowed Cudworth's *True Intellectual System* from the Bristol library for the second time. A reference to the *Republic* in Cudworth sent Coleridge to a Greek text of Plato in the famous 1578 edition of Henry Stephens, from which he entered a brief quotation in his notebook (CN I 204).^[5] Coleridge had little else to say about Plato until after his return from Germany and move to Keswick in July of 1800. But there his reading, some of it in the Taylor translations of the *Cratylus*, *Phaedo*, *Parmenides* and *Timaieus* available since his years at Cambridge, taught him how foolishly condescending his contemporaries could be to pre-Lockean philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle (CL II 675).^[6] From early 1801 on, when he wrote his four letters on John Locke to Josiah Wedgwood, Coleridge continued uneasily to accept the

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empiricist's assumption that Platonic allegories like that of the soul's pre-existence were wildly fanciful.^[7] They were nevertheless valuable, he now better understood, because in encouraging reflection on psychological experiences like his own momentary anticipation of Hartley's death, they helped to confirm his instinctive immaterialism.

The letters on Locke illustrate this refusal of Coleridge to define his kind of transcendentalism as absolutely anti-empirical. Here, as in his later alignment of Plato with Bacon, his concern is with the introspective experience to which the admittedly conflicting philosophies of Plato and Locke both refer. Defining ideas as whatever the mind is thinking about, Locke distinguishes between those that derive from external objects and those that reflect on the operations of the mind itself. These latter ideas of reflection, Coleridge asserts, are the same as those Plato figuratively represents by the soul's recollection of a pre-existent state (CL II 680, 684). The mind has, as it were, a limitless interior that occupies it as much as, or more than, the external world. This immaterial inward space has a priority in Plato, for whom it provides the 'living Sparks' and 'Kindle-fuel' of our most valuable knowledge, that it unquestionably does not have in Locke (CL II 680). But Locke does take our reflective capacity for granted, just as Plato assumes a knowledge through sensation whose worth he minimizes. Coleridge had no quarrel with the patient gathering of information about external data that Locke's theory of knowledge encourages. His own poems, notebooks, and speculations in the philosophy of nature abound with it. What he dislikes is empiricism's exclusion of human subjectivity from such investigation—the tendency to glorify dispassionate objectivity.

Coleridge loved Plato because he came to regard him as alone among the Greeks in so valuing self-knowledge over knowledge of nature that he anticipated Judaeo-Christian personalism. As early as 1803, Coleridge associated Plato with the infusion of a divine self into nature characteristic of the Psalms, and of Hebrew and Christian theology generally, a connection he cemented in an 1826 letter to his son Derwent (CL II 865-66; 6 538). And yet a major goal of the *magnum opus* which Coleridge began planning in 1803 was to incorporate the empiricism of Aristotle, Bacon and Locke into this Platonizing tendency, a project that resulted in a harsher and more consistent critique of Plato than any he had made so far (CL II 947-48). His "Outlines of the History of Logic," which probably dates from 1803, traces the logic and rhetoric of Plato's dialogues to a philosophical outlook that was actually too subject-centered—too quick, that is, to assimilate the particular into the general. Coleridge praises Plato's consistent use of inductive examples in the dialogues because it appropriately aids the philosophical novice, habituated to the world of sense experience, to turn to the world of spirit. But the Platonic dialectic characteristically ascends from the individual to the class in which it

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belongs to the universal idea of that class pre-existing in the divine mind, a process that unfortunately considers 'all that individualizes,' says Coleridge, 'as of the nature of Evil' (*SWF* I 138-39). This movement away from particulars also facilitates the obscure allegorizing of plain truths Coleridge had already complained of in Plato, to say nothing of his wearying 'prolixity.' Surprisingly, given his typical sympathy with Plato, Coleridge here finds him less suitable, at least to the philosophically trained, than Aristotle, whose inductive method only a 'greater richness of illustration' could improve (*SWF* I 131). ^[8]

This severity in no way compromises the essential Platonism of Coleridge who, by February 1805, describes himself as having already passed 'from Unitarianism . . . thro' Spinosism into Plato and St John.' A few months later he remarks, apropos of the death of John Wordsworth, that the best philosophy from Plato to Fichte is about character and duty, beside which life and death are alike but dreams (CN II 2537).^[9] Indeed, Europe's fixation on knowledge of the external world, and consequent impatience with ethics, Coleridge regards as the primary cause of

its smug superiority to all things Platonic' (*Marginalia* II 648). But he also thinks that Plato took his advocacy of a knowledge above that of sense to an extreme that neglected the goodness in instinct, sensation, and the body generally. 'Like the Gossamer Spider, we may float upon air and seem to fly in mid heaven,' he notes in 1804, 'but we have spun the slender Thread out of our own fancies, & it is always fastened to something below' (CN II 2166).

Although Coleridge thought no positive doctrine had as yet been constructed from Plato's known works, he credited the longstanding tradition of unwritten Platonic "dogmata" that could be at least glimpsed through ancient sources (*PL* Coburn 175). Plato had a philosophical system, Coleridge believed, and Neoplatonism, though different from Platonism, is 'strictly conformable' to it and likewise 'harmonizable' with orthodox Christianity (CN II 2447). And yet he often takes serious exception to the way a particular teaching of Plato, or a Neoplatonic interpretation of that teaching, slights facts either of life or of mind. For example, while he agrees with Plato that the rule of the wise is 'the Idea' of all governments—the end to which they tend—Coleridge also insists that the wise themselves are subject to a 'drowsy empiricism,' that their virtue is limited and 'akin to certain errors,' and that the very passions and instincts that correct and supplement their virtue may 'by their folly work out the wisdom of God' (CN I 1612). He treats Proclus's 'cheerless' interpretation of Plato's doctrine of reminiscence far less gently. By reminiscence Coleridge meant, as we have seen, not recalling some pre-existent state, but reflecting on one's own inner life.^[10] He rejects the claim of Proclus that the ideas resulting from this process are forever diminishing, because in that case the drive toward self-knowledge would be at odds with itself. The

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whole point of that drive is to repossess through reflection what Proclus thinks of as the perpetually elusive ideas of some remembered unity. But the complete repossession of those ideas would necessarily defeat their elusiveness and so eliminate the need for any further reflection. Effectively, then, Proclus advocates not the development of the reflective self but its obliteration. By the early 1800s, when Coleridge made this observation, he had clearly had enough of the self-annihilating 'spirituality' of a work like "Religious Musings" that would assimilate the soul into some generic oneness detached from the material and historical conditions of human existence (*PW* I 110). 'What becomes' in this Neoplatonic doctrine, he asks, 'of poor 'I,'—of the Self of each person? Whence comes, whither goes, the personality?' (CN I: Appendix B 457-58).

This skepticism about the political and psychological realism of Plato and his followers should make us wary of wholly identifying Coleridge with anyone in the long tradition Platonic thinking. He has his own constantly developing philosophical viewpoint from which he endlessly interrogates both Plato and the Neoplatonists all the way up to Thomas Taylor, that Romantic apostle of Platonism whom Coleridge perhaps unfairly considered more bewitched by its jargon than knowledgeable of its thought (CN II: Appendix B 458-59). As for Bacon, who gave relative permanence and reality to the objects of sense knowledge that Plato thought illusory and changing, Coleridge surprisingly says that 'practically' Bacon was right (*SWF* I 139).^[11] Not that Coleridge himself made matter absolutely real. Since our ideas fail to encompass the countless 'goings-on' in the particulars of experience, he believed, the only ideas wholly adequate to those particulars are God's, which are 'archetypal,' 'anterior' to them all, and identical to the permanent and real universals of Plato. But while those divine ideas generate particulars, our human ideas do not. On the contrary, claims Coleridge, our ideas must to some extent proceed from and be governed by particulars, if our knowledge of them is to be valid, and in this respect he is far closer to the empirical tradition of Aristotle, Bacon and Locke than to Plato (CL II 1195). As in Plato, to be sure, the development of the self as spirit depends on

reflection, but as an embodied spirit, interacting with a material world, the self grows by giving experience the same practical permanence and reality that Bacon did.

Everyone wants to know the truth, wrote Coleridge—‘that what they appear to themselves to know has a correspondence in Reality,’ and this for him was the human desire represented in the archetypal ideas of Plato (CN III 3592). But Coleridge’s attention to what may be called the Aristoteleian pole in his thinking—the receptivity to experience and practice that he attributed to ‘the Understanding’ and that he thought had to exist with the more exalted intuitions of ‘Reason’—is evident in the increasing dissatisfaction of his middle and later years with the excesses of Platonism. He defended Plato in 1810

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against the enlightened Gibbon on the one hand and credulous, philosophically uncultivated Christians on the other, arguing that Platonic thinking may render the mind ‘lofty and generous’ (CN III 3813-14, 3820, 3901). He commented suggestively from 1810 to 1816 on the *Symposium*, the *Sophist* and the *Republic*, elucidating Plato’s ideas that mathematics and love raise the spirit from sense to intellect, that the obscurity of the philosopher differs from that of the sophist, and that knowledge is recognition (LL I 209-10 and n; 315; LS 98; CN III 3962). But he also accused Plato of encouraging the Neoplatonists’ ‘wild’ objectifying of mathematical numbers and Neoplatonic thought of allowing the speculative side of religion to dominate the moral in a way Christianity does not (CN III 3824 f 112v, 3869 f33v, 3918).

Coleridge’s observations on the relation of Platonism to Christianity are similarly mixed. He recommends the study of Plato and Platonism to aspiring clergymen and maintains the impossibility of an adequate Christian apologetics as long as the apologists continue merely to mime “enlightened” exaltation of Locke over Plato, Aristotle, and the schoolmen (CN III 3934; LS 111).^[12] But he likewise insists that Plato’s *Republic* assumes the possibility of a subordination of lower to higher functions that has never existed either in individuals or in states (LS 62-63 n.6). These judgments are not as contradictory as they seem because, while Coleridge thought Plato anticipated the immaterialism and personalism of Christianity, Plato could hardly have espoused the Christian doctrine of humanity’s fallen state.^[13] Cultivated individuals, Coleridge argues in the *Statesman’s Manual*, may govern themselves morally by invisible principles, maintain a generously universal perspective in their religious practice, and act more wisely than despotically toward others, and these internal powers of Reason, Religion, and Will may spread into a civilized state. Plato’s representation of the ideal ordering of these powers in both private and public life helped prepare the ancient mind, moreover, to accept Christ’s power to redeem human sinfulness. But the disordering effects of original sin on earthly life, in Coleridge’s Christian vision of it, remain inescapable. Personal and civil despotism persist, and religious sectarianism and superstition remain commonplace. Realizing the Platonic ideal in so fallen a world would defeat the very purpose that ideal, says Coleridge, which is to keep the human condition progressive (LS 62-65).

The *Philosophical Lectures* of 1818-19, despite their reliance on Tennemann, both recapitulate and advance Coleridge’s own earlier thinking about Plato. Reading Plato remains propaedeutic to Christianity, but also to philosophic and poetic habits of mind generally (*P Lects* 1949 163, 176). Platonism raises the mind from material appearances to the vital powers existing within them, the interrelationship of those powers, and the possibility of grounding them in a

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“Supreme Mind” and likewise sanctions the artist’s envisioning of those appearances as a symbolic language of spirit. Platonism also supports our sense of an indubitable interior reality at odds with our moral lapses. But since it is the human self “in whom it pleased God that the

consciousness of others' existence should abide," Platonism also seeks to integrate a knowledge of the outer world into this Socratic self-awareness (*P Lects* 1949 166-68; 173-76). Plato lacked, however, the capacity Coleridge so admired in Aristotle of attending to an object of his senses "as being alone to the particular purpose of the mind." Unable to see parts as parts, separable from the whole to which they belong, Plato could not arrange his observation of particulars without absorbing them into his own thought. Since his observation, unlike Aristotle's, had to be "the interpreter of his meditation," Plato could never have constructed the bodies of experimental knowledge Aristotle did. Meanwhile Aristotle, who was unwilling to admit any hypothesis of spirit except when it was necessary as the only remaining one, was deaf to Plato's pervasive immaterialism. Coleridge undoubtedly thought Plato a more adequate philosopher than Aristotle, whose "ENTELECHIE" (or source of the developmental power of things) remained material (*PL* Coburn 80-86). But Coleridge also understood that the post-medieval world, shaped by physical science and increasingly participatory forms of government, could not be saved for a Platonized Christianity unable to assimilate the empirical tradition from Aristotle to Locke.

Coleridge always had an ironic regard for the resistance matter places on our aspirations to transcend it. On Edmund Spenser's 'sober inebriation' with Platonic 'contemplation of the Good, the True, & the Beautiful in the absence of worldly anxieties,' Coleridge says in 1826 that he can never recall similar flights of his own without thinking 'O that I had but three hundred a year' (*CL* VI 541-42). And on the 'sentiment of Love,' that 'super-platonic Disclaiming of the Appetite—Affection all & pure Sensibility'—he shrewdly observes: 'men talk most about that which they are most wanting in' (*SWF* II 1418). In the end, as highly as he valued Plato's philosophy, Coleridge judged it inferior to, and incomparable with, the more materially and historically minded religion of the Word made flesh. That explains his harsh rejection, after so many years of reading and thinking about the dialogues, of the 'silly parallel' of Christ with Socrates: the parallel of the one so many have taken to be 'their Redeemer,' as he says some seven months before his death, 'with an Athenian philosopher, of whom we should know nothing except through his glorification in Plato and Xenophon' (*IT* 1, 3 January 1834).

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[1] Wordsworth similarly trusts his vision of a 'new world... ruled by those fixed laws/Whence spiritual dignity originates' over the "despotism of the eye" in *The Fourteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Owen (1985): 12:127-31, 13: 366-77.

[2] Taylor's translations of one book of the first of Plotinus' six *Enneads* and of *The Hymns of Orpheus* appeared separately in 1787. His *Commentaries of Proclus* (1789) contained his translation of Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs* (first published probably between 1787 and 1789) along with the fifth and eighth books of Plotinus' fifth *Ennead*. Coleridge acknowledged in 1810 that he had sent for Taylor's translations and commentaries 'in early manhood' (possibly to Thelwall on 19 Nov. 1796) but denied that they had originally led him to study Platonism, leaving us to guess what did (*CN* 3 3935 and n; *CL* I 262).

[3] Coleridge could have read at Cambridge the English translations of Plato that Thomas Taylor had published while he was there: *Phaedrus* in 1792 and *Cratylus, Phaedo, Parmenides* and *Timaeus* in 1793. On the eighteenth-century revival of Greek studies (and of Plato in particular) that Taylor represented see Kathleen Raine, "Thomas Taylor in England," in *Thomas Taylor the Platonist* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969), 3-48; Marilyn Gaull, *English Romanticism* (New York: Norton, 1988); Kathleen Wheeler, "Blake, Coleridge and Eighteenth-Century Greek Scholarship," *The Wordsworth Circle* 30, II (1999): 89-94.

[4] He had earlier included the poem in a letter to another practically minded friend, Thomas Poole, with the additional oddity that the followers of Fénelon hold a variation on the doctrine of pre-existence (CL I 246). Coleridge is perhaps testing Poole and Thelwall for their reaction to his Platonism in anticipation of presenting the sonnet to an even less sympathetic reading public. See PW I 153-54 for the published version in which Plato and Fénelon each get a footnote.

[5] This three volume work was Coleridge's own edition of Plato. Since its accompanying Latin translation by Jean de Serres (John Serranus) was thought inferior to Marsilio Ficino's, it was the latter's that was most often reprinted (see N I 204 and n along with 937 and n). See also J. W. Moss, *A Manual of Classical Bibliography*, 1837 (reprinted Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1969). On Serranus' nevertheless important place in the history of Platonic scholarship see E.N. Tigerstedt, "The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato," in *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum*, 52 (1974): 39-42.

[6] These translations may have been among the works of Plato that Coleridge mentioned to Thelwall in 1796 as typical of his 'out of the way' reading (CL I 260). Coleridge's specific references to the *Theatetus* and *Meno* as well as the *Phaedo* in the first of his letters to Josiah Wedgwood on Locke (18 Feb. 1801) suggest the possibility that his reading in Plato early in his time at Keswick went beyond Taylor's translations, though many of the references he then made to specific dialogues, and quotations from them (*Timaeus*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*), derive from commentators on Plato known or unknown (see N I 937I, 1000C, 1002, 1379). He probably meant Taylor's 1793 translations when he told Sotheby in the fall of 1802 that he had been reading the *Parmenides* and the *Timaeus* "with great care" the preceding winter (CL II 866). Taylor's completed *Works of Plato*, including nine revised and edited earlier translations by Floyer Sydenham (1710-1787), did not appear until 1804.

[7] See the joking reference, originating in his reading of Cudworth, to Synesius, the Christian Platonist who would rather have lost a bishopric than think his soul younger than his body (CN I 200).

[8] Coleridge's complaints about Plato's obscurity, qualified by regard for his genius, continue in BL I 233.

[9] On the frivolousness of speculative knowledge unrelated to the healthily moral see *SWF* I 615.

[10] On Coleridge's doubt that Plato himself meant the doctrine of pre-existence literally see BL II 147.

[11] Coleridge thought the assumed departure of Bacon from Plato due largely to the Reformers' distortions of Plato's thought and Bacon's reliance on those distortions (*The Friend* I 467).

[12] This conviction that Plato prepares the mind for the acceptance of Christianity as a religion, not merely a philosophy, recapitulates the self-consciously Augustinian progress of Coleridge's own mind as recorded in BL I 144, 179-80, and 205.

[13] And yet see *Aids to Reflection* 41-42 on Plato's possible anticipation of the doctrine of divine mediation.