S GILES-IN-READING

SOUTHAMPTON STREET

URBAN ABBEY PUB STUDY

A SACRED DIVE INTO: OWEN BARFIELD'S WHAT COLERIDGE THOUGHT,

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CH. 1: THOUGHTS & THINKING

CENTRAL ARGUMENT: Coleridge differentiates between "thinking" as an active process and "thoughts" as the products of that process. He emphasizes that thinking is not merely passive reception but an energetic, often unconscious, activity of the mind.

KEY THEMES:

Distinguishing without Dividing: Coleridge argues against the prevalent assumption that we can only distinguish things that are physically separable. He uses the analogy of water, separable into drops yet composed of inseparable elements, to illustrate the distinction between thinking and perceiving, while acknowledging their practical inseparability.

Emancipation from the "Despotism of the Eye": Coleridge criticizes the overreliance on visual imagery in understanding mental processes, advocating for a shift from sense-based perception to abstract, conceptual thinking. He suggests tracing the etymology of words as a means to free the mind from the dominance of visual perception.

Thinking as an "Act and Energy": Coleridge highlights the dynamic nature of thinking, drawing parallels with the effort observed in a child grappling with abstract concepts and a water insect navigating upstream. However, he distinguishes between effortful and effortless thinking, citing the example of comprehending geometrical truths.

Thinking vs. Attending: Coleridge differentiates between active "thinking" and passive "attending." While attention is crucial for focusing on a train of thought, it is intellectually passive, whereas thinking involves the active reconstruction and engagement with the presented ideas.

Thought-Component in Perception: Coleridge argues that perception is not merely sensory input but involves a thought-component. Our experience of an external world is shaped by mental constructs, implying that even perception is an active process influenced by thought.

Inseparability of Act and Product: While Coleridge distinguishes between thinking (the act) and thoughts (the product), he acknowledges their normal inseparability. He uses the analogy of a geometric figure: the mental act of constructing the figure is inseparable from the figure itself, though they remain conceptually distinct.

KEY QUOTES:

"the concept, and perhaps the experience, of thinking as an act, or as an 'act and energy,' are the toll-gate in the middle of the bridge, the barrier that has to be opened before we can get across."

"In all inevitable Truths, e.g. that the two sides of a triangle are greater than the third, I feel my will active: I seem to will the Truth, as well as to perceive it. Think of this."

"By thought I here mean the voluntary production in our own minds of those states of consciousness, to which, as to his fundamental facts, the Writer has referred us: while attention has for its object the order and connection of thoughts and images, each of which is in itself already and familiarly known."

"Under that despotism of the eye . . . we are restless because invisible things are not the objects of vision; and metaphysical systems, for the most part, become popular, not for their truth, but in proportion as they attribute to causes a susceptibility of being seen, if only our visual organs were sufficiently powerful."

"It is a dull and obtuse mind, that must divide in order to distinguish; but it is a still worse, that distinguishes in order to divide."

SUMMARY: Coleridge's concept of "thinking as an act" challenges traditional notions of passive perception and emphasizes the mind's active role in constructing knowledge and shaping our experience of the world. His insights encourage a deeper understanding of the dynamic interplay between thinking, perception, and the formation of thoughts.