S GILES-IN-READING

SOUTHAMPTON STREET

URBANABBEY PUBSTUDY

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

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CH. 4: LIFE

CENTRAL ARGUMENT: Coleridge argues against the prevailing Cartesian dualism of his time, which divided the world into mind and matter, creating a problematic gap between the inorganic and organic. He posits that life is not merely a property of organisms but a fundamental principle operating throughout nature. He defines life as "the internal copula of bodies" or "the power which discloses itself from within as a principle of unity in the many," emphasizing the inherent interconnectedness and dynamism of all existence.

KEY THEMES:

Critique of Cartesian Dualism: Coleridge vehemently opposes the Cartesian division of mind and matter, arguing that it creates an artificial gap between the organic and inorganic. He posits that life is a unifying principle that permeates all phenomena, rejecting the notion of an inert, mechanistic universe.

Life as Antecedent Unity: Coleridge challenges the prevalent definitions of life that rely on observable functions and effects. He argues that life is not an abstraction derived from living things, but a fundamental, causative power that precedes and produces them. This idea resonates with Plato's concept of "eidos" or "idea."

The Importance of Change: Coleridge emphasizes the inherent dynamism of life, seeing it as a perpetual process of transformation and evolution. He argues that focusing solely on the material composition of organisms, without considering their inherent drive towards change and growth, misses the essence of life.

Life as Individuation and Connection: Coleridge defines life as a "tendency at once to individuate and to connect, to detach, but so as either to retain or to reproduce attachment." This principle manifests as an ascending series of increasingly complex organisms, each striving towards wholeness while maintaining a connection to the larger unity of nature.

Polarity as the Law of Nature: Central to Coleridge's concept of life is the law of polarity, the interplay of opposing forces that drive creation and growth. He sees polarity at work in all aspects of nature, from magnetism to reproduction, and argues that it is through the dynamic tension between opposites that life unfolds and evolves.

KEY QUOTES:

"The solution of phaenomena can never be derived from phaenomena." This quote highlights Coleridge's rejection of purely empirical explanations of life."

"Remember, that whatever is, lives. A thing absolutely lifeless is inconceivable, except as a thought, image, or fancy, in some other being." This quote illustrates Coleridge's belief that life is a fundamental principle that permeates all existence."

"Thus we may say that whatever is organized from without, is a product of mechanism; whatever is mechanized from within, is a product of organization." This quote encapsulates Coleridge's distinction between mechanical processes and the self-organizing principle of life."

"The tendency having been ascertained, what is its most general law? —polarity, or the essential dualism of Nature, arising out of its productive unity, and still tending to reaffirm it, either as equilibrium, indifference, or identity." This quote underscores the centrality of polarity in Coleridge's understanding of life and nature."

"It has before been noticed that the progress of Nature is more truly represented by the ladder, than by the suspended chain . . . and that she expands as by concentric circles." This quote suggests Coleridge's vision of evolution as an ascending process, driven by an internal principle rather than an external force."

SUMMARY: Coleridge's theory of life offers a profound alternative to the mechanistic worldview prevalent in his time. By emphasizing the interconnectedness, dynamism, and inherent unity of all existence, he presents a vision of life as a constantly evolving and multifaceted force operating throughout nature. His ideas remain relevant today,