8

Understanding

"We must seek," wrote Coleridge in the *Friend,* "for some general law, the action of which is such, as (if it remained untempered and uncounteracted) would prevent or greatly endanger man's development and progression. But this we shall find in that law of his understanding and fancy, by which he is impelled to abstract the changes and outward relations of matter and to arrange them under the form of causes and effects." [1]

Here is a good example of one of those pregnant passages—pregnant with the whole structure of his thought—which require some of that background to be filled in, if they are to be more than superficially understood. In this chapter we shall endeavour to perform that office for one particular phrase, namely the apparently casual reference to "the law of his understanding and fancy." And, since the previous chapter has already dealt at some length with fancy, we shall now be principally concerned with understanding. It will be well however to preface with a few observations that apply not only to understanding, but to fancy also, as well as to some of the other key words in Coleridge's psychology. Perception, imagination, fancy, understanding etc. are not separate "faculties." In making use of them a man is not "exerting different faculties"; he is "exerting his faculties in a different way." [2] Although this must already be clear from the previous chapters, if they have been at all understood, yet there has been so much misunderstanding over it that it is probably best to state it definitely, as Coleridge himself did on more than one occasion. We are in less danger of being misunderstood if we call them "powers," but it is not always convenient or advisable to ignore the term in common use, and Coleridge himself by no means always did so.

There is another consequence, more important than nomenclature, which follows from dismissing any fiction of separate faculties; and that

is, that we shall not be exasperated when attempted definitions of them are found to overlap one another. This is inevitable, because the powers themselves interpenetrate one another. They can and must be *distinguished* from one another, but that does not mean that they are *divided:*

> Distinct *notions* do not suppose different *things*. When we make a threefold distinction in human nature, we are fully aware, that it is a distinction not a division, and that in every act of Mind the *Man* unites the properties of Sense, Understanding and Reason. Nevertheless, it is of great practical importance, that these distinctions should be made and understood . . .[3]

The difference between dividing and distinguishing is a point we have had before.* It is rather remarkable that the type of Coleridge critic, who will ignorantly accuse him in one breath of adopting an old-fashioned psychology of "faculties," will sometimes be the very one to complain in the next of inconsistency because the components of his terminology are not kept sufficiently distinct. It is the nature of inseparable powers not to be separate, and we are in a realm of discourse where one subject not only interpenetrates another, but is quite likely to be in process of actually changing into it. We may, if an analogy will help, have defined very precisely the difference between "pushing" and "throwing," but how many contexts will remain in which what we must say of the one would be equally applicable to the other? Thus, imagination, "as soon as it is fixed upon one image, becomes understanding; but while it is unfixed and wavering between them, attaching itself permanently to none, it is imagination."[4] Even sensation is already intelligence in process of constructing itself,[5] and that process is essential in the psychology both of instinct and of fancy. Nevertheless we must fix and use names, if we are to think and speak at all—or, as Coleridge himself put it, "unless we would make an end of philosophy, by comprizing all things in each thing, and thus denying that any one power of the universe can be affirmed to be itself and not another."[6]

Coleridge both defined and described the understanding on a number of different occasions and in a number of different contexts.[7] He was much more definite about it indeed than he ever succeeded in being about fancy. We must select some one definition to start from, and we will take the one found in the original (1812) version of the *Friend*:

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* See Chapter 1, pp. 18–20.

> the Understanding or regulative faculty is manifestly distinct from Life and Sensation, its *function* being to take up the *passive affections* of the Sense into Distinct Thoughts and Judgments. These Forms however, as they are first awakened by impressions from the Senses, so have they no Substance or Meaning, unless in their application to Objects of the Senses . . .[8]

A few sentences further on he emphasises the difference between this and "reason," as he himself uses—and again has frequently defined—that word. The distinction between understanding and reason* is, for the comprehension of Coleridge, an all-important one, and its importance is a matter about which he never had any doubt. Moreover he was deeply convinced that the failure of most people in his time to grasp the distinction was the very sleeping-sickness of the age. He said in later years that the *Friend* was the one of his prose works to which he attached the greatest importance and he said in the *Friend* itself that, once his readers had grasped that distinction, they would have little difficulty in comprehending anything else. The habit of using reason and understanding as virtual synonyms has however not ceased; so that any reader acquainted neither with Kant nor with Coleridge finds the dice loaded against him. He starts off on the wrong foot, because in many modern contexts the vaguer connotations of the two words are actually the opposite of those implicit in Coleridge's use of them. *Reason,* with its derivatives and parallels, *reasoning, reasonable, ratiocination,* often sounds to us the shallower of the two; *understanding* the deeper because more sympathetic. The first thing to do therefore, while we are reading Coleridge, is to jettison these more familiar associations.[9]

Reason will form the subject of the ensuing chapter; but partly because the contexts in which Coleridge has most frequently defined and delineated the understanding are just those in which he meticulously distinguishes it from reason,[10] and partly because of the very nature of the relation between the two, some anticipation is inevitable and there will be not a little said about reason in the present chapter also.

If the understanding is to be strictly called, not a faculty but a "power," it must be said of reason, speaking with equal strictness, that it is not even a power.[11] It is not *a* power, though, as "the power of Ideas," [12] it is in one of its aspects, the source of all powers. "Without

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* As to the use, or not, of the initial capital, see Chapter 9, below.

being either the sense, the understanding, or the imagination, it contains all three within itself, even as the mind contains its thoughts, and is present in and through them all; or as the expression pervades the different features of an intelligent countenance." [13] "All reason is above nature" [14] and reason is therefore *really* different "in kind" * from all those degrees of nature and from all those degrees of the human psyche, correlative to nature, which we call functions and faculties. Psychologically therefore it is to be apprehended not as a power, but rather as a gift[15]—a gift which the human understanding enjoys, and by virtue of which it is human.

But, though reason is present *to* the understanding alone, it is present *in* the whole process of nature. This appears to contradict (to any reader's own unawakened understanding it *does* contradict) the previous proposition that all reason is "above" nature; and that contradiction is perhaps the principal difficulty in the way of comprehending what Coleridge meant by it. It is one that is simply not removable, unless we are prepared to treat his whole cosmology as an *alternative* to the Cartesian dichotomy, and not simply as an interpretation of it. For the present we must leave it at that. It is for instance, because reason is present in nature that sensation is potential instinct, and that instinct itself is potential understanding—which will then be open to the ideas of reason; so that it is not merely metaphorical to say, as Coleridge does in Chapter XII of the *Biographia Literaria,* that those who possess the philosophic imagination "feel in their own spirits the same instinct, which impels the chrysalis of the horned fly to leave room in its involucrum for antennae yet to come. They know and feel that the *potential* works *in* them, even as the *actual* works *on* them." [16]

It is because reason is present in nature, and *not* merely because of repressed physical appetites, or of physically "inherited" memories, that we can speak fruitfully of a "*consciousness,* which lies beneath or (as it were) *behind* the spontaneous consciousness natural to all reflecting beings," [17] and that it nevertheless makes sense to call this consciousness-beneath-consciousness "philosophic." [18] Indeed the best way of approaching the relation between reason's "presence in" nature and its "presence to" the understanding, may well be to think in terms of "the unconscious" and consciousness, or, more simply, of sleeping and waking: "Plants are Life dormant; Animals = Somnambulists; the mass of

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* Cf. Chapter 7, pp. 83 ff., above.

Mankind Day-dreamers; the Philosopher only awake."[19] What was present but asleep as life in nature becomes, when present to the understanding, the awakener. It begins the awakening process in all men, but it can only bring it to completion when it has been discerned and, in being discerned, becomes aware of itself as reason. That is why the distinction between understanding and reason is so important. Meanwhile, for the mass of mankind, "the understanding sleeps in order that the fancy may dream."[20]

Some of the terminological distinctions Coleridge makes, he does not (as we have seen) himself invariably observe, occasionally perhaps from carelessness or haste but more often for the reasons already given. In a dynamic philosophy "faculties" are "powers," and "kinds" themselves are ultimately "degrees." The distinction between understanding and reason however is not in this category. Moreover Coleridge not only made it explicit many times over; in any context in which it was at all relevant, he almost invariably observed the distinction himself, though, because of the intimate relation between the two, it is not always easy to do so. That may have already become apparent from the present chapter, the object of which is to build up the concept of understanding in artificial isolation from that of reason.

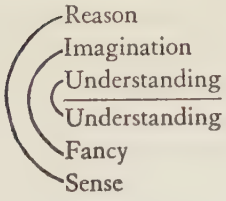
In doing so it will be best to begin with the gamut, or scale, he himself drew up in one of his marginal notes:

Reason
Imagination
Understanding

Understanding
Fancy
Sense

And first it must be emphasised that what appears on the page as linear succession must be imagined in the mode of polarity. That this is so is not only evident from the rest of Coleridge's thought, but it is also underlined by the fact that the whole series is written out twice, the two lists appearing side by side but in reverse order; so that reason appears next and opposite to sense and imagination next and opposite to fancy.* Another way would have been to link the polarities together and we should then get:

* See pp. 101 and 219, below.



"Extremes meet" was, as is well known, one of Coleridge's favourite maxims; but we also see here that the point where the two extremes most gradually and observably encounter (though they were of course meeting and interpenetrating throughout) is precisely the understanding. There is a polarity between understanding and understanding, a tension within the understanding itself. Keeping this in mind will help us to apprehend in depth some of Coleridge's other pronouncements on the topic of the understanding, for instance:

> For the understanding is in all respects a medial and mediate faculty, and has therefore two extremities or poles, the sensual, in which form it is St. Paul's *φρόνημα σαρκός** and the intellectual pole, or the hemisphere (as it were) turned towards the reason.[21]

This polarity, which constitutes the understanding, is, in accordance with the essential character of polarity, a relation between an active component and a passive one, either of which may predominate. It is active as bringing down the upper half of the series, passive as bringing up the lower half; active out of reason, and passive out of sense.[22] So to divide it—to treat the passive understanding, and all below it, in notional isolation from the active and all above it, is of course an artificial disentangling from one another of "two forces of one Power." It is none the less necessary for the purpose of fully conscious apprehension; and accordingly the remainder of this chapter will concern itself as exclusively as possible with the lower half of the series, reserving the upper for the ensuing chapter on *Reason*.

'Mere' understanding—understanding conceived as unirradiated by reason—is a faculty man shares with the higher animals; in whom it is the further development of instinct. It is in fact Bertrand Russell's "animal inference." So considered, but only so considered, it is not different in kind from the "instinctive intelligence manifested in the ant, the dog,

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* *Phronēma sarkos.* Romans, 8.7, translated "carnal mind" in the A.V.

the elephant etc." [23] For instance, it is subject to the physical laws of heredity.[24] The progress of evolution in fact from sense to passive understanding is an unbroken one in both man and animal. But in *man* there is also its polar opposite, active understanding. Moreover, although it is convenient to use the stage of understanding for pointing it out, this difference between human and animal psychology is also present at *all* stages in the series. It is present, for example, in the faculty of "attention" which was considered in Chapter 1; and, if we were to proceed further downward into the "sense" pole, we should no doubt have to begin distinguishing the element of "intentionality" in human perception, as marking the operation already, at the extreme of passivity, of that opposite pole of activity, which is the act of consciousness itself *in potentia.*

The animal however does not perform any *act,* which entails withdrawal from, and contemplation of, the natural process of which its intelligence remains a part:

> . . . the Understanding wherever it does not possess or use the Reason, as another and inward eye, may be defined the conception of the Sensuous, or the faculty by which we generalize and arrange the phaenomena of perception: that faculty, the functions of which contain the rules and constitute the possibility of outward Experience.[25]

The word *rules* is important here. Coleridge uses it frequently when writing of the understanding. Understanding is "the adaptive power." [26] Rules, unlike principles or laws, grow out of experience. They are inventions, whose mother is necessity. Understanding is "the faculty of suiting measures to circumstances" [27] or of "adapting means to proximate ends." [28] And it is in this sense that Coleridge is thinking when he contrasts understanding as "the faculty of rules" with reason as "the source of principles." [29] From life to instinct to instinctive intelligence to understanding, the progression is one without sharp breaks, and the true contrast is not between instinct and understanding (which differ only in degree), but between both of them and reason.[30]

One consequence that ensues from this, for dynamic philosophy though not for a theory of merely emergent evolution, is the following. Just as understanding cannot be explained without our seeing it as developed instinct, so instinct itself cannot be explained without our

seeing it as potential understanding. "The lower derives its intelligibility from the higher." [31] At the same time the absence of any sharp break does not mean simply a linear progression from the one to the other. It is not incompatible with substantial *change*. It is the same here as it is with the evolutionary change from vegetable to animal life. "We are not to seek in either for analogies to the other, but for counterpoints . . . the nearer the common source, the greater the likeness; the farther the remove the greater the opposition." [32] Polarity is a parameter within which 'the more there is of mine, the less there is of yours'; and therefore "the Understanding appears (as a general rule) in an inverse proportion to the Instinct," [33] of which it is none the less a true development.

This brings us naturally to the mental process known as "abstraction." [34] Understanding is "the faculty judging according to sense" [35] and "judging" entails abstraction. A rule of behaviour—as contrasted with a blind instinctual drive in lower organisms, or in some particular organ of a more complex creature—is already potential abstraction; but in *human* psychology abstraction involves something more; for it entails the power not merely to behave by rules, but also to formulate them—to know, in fact what the word *rule* means. For what renders understanding human is precisely this ability to identify by naming. It is this that gives the possibility of the distinctively human acquirement of speech. No abstraction, no language. But for human understanding, and therefore for the coming forth of language, the presence of reason is essential—its presence, not yet the apprehension of it *as* reason. Thus, there is probably no better illustration of this 'dreaming' presence of reason to the human understanding than the birth of language, whether in the history of humanity or in the mind of a growing child.

Coleridge defines the proper function of the human understanding as "that of generalizing the notices received from the senses in order to the construction of names." [36] The generalising is done by animals also; but from the absence of reason, they do not go on to abstraction proper and, with that, to the construction of names; they do not achieve the stage "of referring particular notices (that is, impressions or sensations) to their proper names; and, *vice versa,* names to their correspondent class or kind of notices—" [37] Hence the significance of the part played by language in the development of human understanding out of instinctive intelligence. Reason participates in language as the element of

grammar; and it is this that "gradually raises into acts and objects of distinct consciousness what Nature and the alone true natural state of Man had previously called forth as instinct." It is grammar that

> reflects the forms of the human mind, and gradually familiarises the half-conscious Boy with the frame and constitution of his own Intellect, as the polished Glass does the unconscious infant with the features of his own countenance . . . bringing about that power of Abstraction, by which as the condition and the means of self-knowledge, the reasoning Intellect of Man is distinguished in *kind* from the mechanical Understanding of the Dog, the Elephant, the Bee, the Ant, and whatever other animals display an intelligence that we cannot satisfactorily reduce to mere Instinct . . .[38]

Abstraction therefore is the distinctive mark of the human understanding; and we have already seen the high importance Coleridge attached to it (Chapter 1, pp. 20–21, above). But it is important as a means, not as an end in itself; and the ends towards which it should be employed are imagination and the ideas of reason. The abstract, that is the human, understanding is not only concerned with names; it is concerned *only* with names.

> in all instances, it is words, names, or, if images, yet images used as words or names, that are the only and exclusive subject of understanding. In no instance do we understand a thing in itself; but only the name to which it is referred.[39]

Whereas, in instinct, we are still united with nature; and whereas in imagination we are re-united with it; by understanding we are detached from it. If therefore we make of understanding an end in itself, we become "a race of animals, in whom the presence of reason is manifested solely by the absence of instinct." [40]

> falling prostrate before lifeless images, the creatures of his own abstraction, [man] is himself sensualized, and becomes a slave to the things of which he was formed to be the conqueror and sovereign.[41]

We begin to comprehend more fully perhaps what was at the back of Coleridge's mind when he wrote in the *Friend* of man being "impelled" by the law of his understanding and fancy to abstract the outward relations of matter and to arrange them under the form of causes and effects; and when he went on a little later to refer to this impulsion

as a "temptation." [42] Idols are means which we have been tempted into revering as ends. To idolize the understanding, instead of being active to awaken the reason dreaming within it, is to corrupt or pervert our part in reason. The abstract understanding has two gifts to bestow: accuracy, or the elimination of error;[43] and that detachment from the whole process of life which the existence of an individual spirit presupposes. All beyond that depends on imagination and stems from reason. Understanding, alone, gives "outness," accuracy and the experience of unity; but this unity is not unity in multeity; it is unity by the exclusion of multeity. Understanding, alone, assures us that we exist as separate and distinct points; but only *as* points, only as the nothings of a Sartre-type existentialism. It is by virtue of reason and imagination that we exist substantially as very beings, and it is only through reason and imagination that we can even be sure that anything exists outside of us. Through understanding we experience the culmination of our detachment; through imagination and the gift of reason we realise, in polarity, that very culmination as the possibility of a different and higher order of attachment.[44]

Thus, to ignore the distinction between understanding and reason is to lose sight of the essential difference between man and beast. It is to commit existential suicide. And this, Coleridge tried to show, was exactly what had been happening with the spread of English empiricism and the technologising of science—submitting, as the Sophists had done long ago, "all positions alike, however heterogeneous, to the criterion of the mere understanding." "The understanding was to be corrupted by the perversion of the reason" [45] and what was called "the Enlightenment," as is not uncommon with cant labels, was mainly the opposite of what the label signifies. It was the deliberate shuttering of the understanding from the light of reason.

It may help at this stage to look once more at the psychological scale, this time as Coleridge himself in fact wrote it down:

lowest	*highest*
Sense	Reason
Fancy	Imagination
Understanding	Understanding
Understanding	Understanding
Imagination	Fancy
Reason	Sense

The fundamental break (emphasised by the line) lies between the two opposite directions that can be taken by the understanding itself, and it is this that originates the growing divergence between the contrasted pairs in the series. The difference between fancy and imagination is an easier one to spot than a difference between understanding and understanding, between understanding as passive and understanding as active. At the moment when the tide turns it is difficult to say whether it is going out or coming in; but choose a moment five minutes before or five minutes after the turn, and you can be pretty certain. We have tried, in the two previous chapters, to watch Coleridge's mind stumbling, as it were, on the fact of those divergent directions after they have reached a wider and more conspicuous stage. It was the task of the present one to observe the finesse with which he afterwards probed the divergence to its origin in the understanding; or rather to its commencement there, since its origin lies of course in the will.

If we would now venture to express, in terms of his own gamut, the light in which he beheld the intellectual climate of his age, we should have to set against the series just quoted the following altered and truncated version of it:

Fancy (active)
Understanding
Fancy (passive)
Sense

Refusal to distinguish understanding from reason is "the omission to notice what not being noticed will be supposed not to exist." [46] To the understanding apart from reason the Peripatetic maxim *Nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu* does apply. Its forms, as we have seen, "as they are first awakened by the senses, . . . have . . . no substance or meaning, unless in their application to the objects of the senses" (p. 94, above). Concepts without perceptual content *are* "empty." But it is really only understanding, with *denial* of reason, that adds and adopts the legal maxim, *De rebus non apparentibus et non existentibus eadem est ratio.*[47] It is only understanding, with denial of reason, that falls under the despotism of the eye; with the result that the faculty of abstraction, which affords access to the ideas of reason, is turned back, in its search for content, upon the impressions of sense. If you will not acknowledge

the "downshine" of imagination and reason into the active understanding, you will have nothing to set over it but fancy all over again.

And this, in Coleridge's eyes, was just what had long been happening. This is what he has at the back of his mind when he affirms that "the Present is the Epoch of the Understanding and the Senses";[48] or when he refers to "abstract knowledge, or the science of the mere understanding," which "leads to a science of delusion";[49] or when he speaks of "Imagination excluded from poesy; and fancy paramount in physics; the eclipse of the ideal by the mere shadow of the sensible."[50] It is what lies at the back of his mind when he coolly pronounces that "Incredulity is but credulity seen from behind, bowing and nodding assent to the habitual and the fashionable."[51]

There will be more to say of this, when we come to the bearing of what Coleridge thought on the development of science. But first of all it is clearly necessary to endeavour to treat at some length of what has already, and unavoidably, been frequently referred to in this chapter; that is, reason and the ideas of reason.