9

Reason

It was pointed out in the last chapter that the fundamental difference between human and animal psychology is effective, not only in the understanding, but at all stages of consciousness. In other words, reason, which appears at the top of Coleridge's scale of mental powers, nevertheless irradiates the human psyche at all stages of its natural evolution. Since this is both an unfamiliar and, in this "epoch of the understanding and the senses," * a difficult notion, it may help at this point to construct an analogy, though it is one which must not be pressed too hard.

If we were to replace the parameter of psychology, to which Coleridge's scale applies, with that of sexual relationship; and if we were to substitute "law" for "reason," then understanding could be taken as corresponding to something like "mating." Permeated by law, mating becomes the human mating called marriage; and, as such, it may 'rise' into the sphere of law itself (dynasty, nationality, status, contract, property-rights etc.). But the difference between marriage and mating is also effective below the "mating" level, even down into the moment of copulation (corresponding with Coleridge's "sense"), where it appears as, for instance, the possibility of a sacramental dimension, different in kind from that of 'mere' copulation. The fact that the category of sacrament is 'higher' than that of social and municipal law improves rather than mars an avowedly imperfect analogy. Extremes meet; and we shall be noticing later that from one point of view reason, at the top of the 'scale,' has a greater affinity with its octave, sense, than it has with the understanding, which it enters only to sharpen it to the point of nullity; or even with the imagination, into which it is ever willing to be transformed.

---

* Chapter 8, p. 103, above.

Professor Muirhead has observed that Coleridge added to the dynamic theory of reality "the conception of the principle of that activity as the nisus towards individuality." [1] We have already traced this in his *Theory of Life,* and have seen how, above the human level, the nisus is from consciousness towards self-consciousness; which is another name for individuality. It is against this background that we are bound to interpret the scale; and, in doing so, we find that the mystery, or problem, of self-consciousness can be effectively confronted as the mystery or problem of the relation between understanding and reason; and, above all, in the circumstance that reason may be present to the understanding in two different modes, one of which we characterised as 'dreaming' and the other as 'waking.' In the former mode reason is present to the understanding, but without being realised or apprehended as reason. In the latter mode it is both present and consciously realised as present; it is "conscious self-knowledge." [2] And progress from the former mode to the latter is the final stage of the nisus.

Coleridge found, or adopted, several different ways of formulating the distinction between the two modes: as for instance conceptual reason and ideal reason; negative reason (*lumen a luce*) and positive reason (*lux intellectus*).[3] But when he speaks more generally of the "irradiation" of understanding by reason, he does not always specify which of the two modes he is referring to. Nor is this very surprising, when we reflect that the very act of *talking about* negative reason is a step towards converting it into positive reason, since it involves becoming to some extent conscious of reason. The same must be said of his use of the capital letter. It would be pleasant if we could say comfortably: "*Reason,* yes, that is positive reason or *lux intellectus; reason,* yes, that is negative reason, or *lumen a luce*"; but it will be found impossible to do so. Coleridge's free and irregular use of the initial capital for all sorts of words (including *Understanding*), to which he wishes to draw particular attention at the moment, is well known and has already become manifest from quotations, where we have preserved it intact. Elsewhere we have thought it wiser for the most part to cut out the capital, though in the particular case of "Reason" the decision was reached only after considerable hesitation. Even there however it is doubtful whether on the whole it would help, and it might even hinder the important thing, which is this: while remaining immovably aware of the difference between reason and understanding, to sit rather loosely to the *word* "reason" in Coleridge. It was not always relevant, or even

possible, for him to maintain the distinction between positive reason and negative reason; not only so, but, where occasionally the word is used in the sense of reason-*ing*—ratiocination—it amounts to no more than the active human understanding.[4] This is in fact the sense in which it is most commonly used in current speech, and Coleridge himself could so use it in contexts outside of philosophy and psychology, in his political writings for example.

Reason, in its proper sense, specifies the mere understanding into distinctively human understanding. And this in two ways, or by two stages. As negative, it brings about the total detachment which individuality presupposes. As positive reason, it is the being of the individual so detached. The ideas of reason "are of higher origin than the notions of the understanding, and by the irradiation of which the understanding itself becomes a human understanding." [5] (Because it is being, reason itself has no plural. We can speak of the "understandings" of a number of people, but not of their "reasons." So, too, Platonizing philosophers spoke of superhuman, or divine "Intelligences"; never of divine "Reasons." The only plural of reason is "ideas of reason," to which we must come in the following chapter.) But "when this light shines downward into the understanding . . . it is always more or less refracted, and differently in every different individual." [6] The light of reason is thus both the origin and the abiding basis of individuality. Without the positive presence of reason to the understanding, there is no individuality, only the detachment which individual being presupposes. Reason, in both its negative and its positive aspect, is the individualiser.

And yet—and this is where the difficulty occurs for most people—reason is, not only "supersensuous," but also, as has just been seen, "superindividual." [7] Not only so, but its whole characteristic is to *be* superindividual. It individualises because it is, and by being, superindividual; by being *totus in omni parte*—"entire in each and one in all." [8] There is abundant evidence of how well aware Coleridge was that this irreducible contradiction was at once the most unacceptable and the most important truth he had to deliver. How often, and how very hard he tried! We may look in particular at the disquisition on two passages from Leighton and Harrington in *Aids to Reflection,*[9] or to the corresponding one on Harrington in the *Friend,*[10] or to the *Statesman's Manual* with its long Appendix B.[11] But in one place and another he was always at it. As to its importance, we have already heard him insisting

that, if the *Friend's* readers would only grasp it, all else would follow. More emphatically, when he comes to read through the *Statesman's Manual* some time after it has been printed, he adds in ink:

> Let not the Reader imagine that this distinction of the Understanding from the Reason is optional, or a mere refinement in words. It is either false and mischievous: or it is a most radical and necessary truth. I know indeed of but one other truth of equal worth and pregnancy—and that is the Primacy of the Will, as deeper than and (in order of *thought*) antecedent to Reason. See St. John's Gospel 1.18.[12]

These are only two examples, from many, of the heavy stress he laid on this (to many people) almost hair-splitting distinction. It should not be difficult to see why. The line drawn *between understanding and understanding,* in that 'scale' of mental powers, was no abstraction to him. It represented the stage on which the whole drama of the human mind, and with it of human destiny itself, is being played out. For it is at that point in the scale that the will may turn either way: back to negative reason and, through that, to the mere understanding, and through that, to sense; or on to positive reason.[13] But that involves, first of all grasping that there *is* such a thing as positive reason. It involves *knowing* the reason as directly present to the understanding. Here, if anywhere, then it may accurately be said that "Truth is self-restoration." [14]

For the other way amounts in the end to existential suicide. This is the truth which he saw so clearly and from which nearly all around him, including the representatives of the Churches, were sedulously looking away—with disastrous consequences.[15] Perhaps, looking or attempting to look through his eyes, we may say that he saw the relation between understanding and reason, not as a piece of wire-drawn psychology, but rather as the relation between the tiger and the lady in the old limerick. Understanding had gorged reason, instead of being ridden by it, and the brash complacency left over from the Enlightenment was "the smile on the face of the tiger." [16]

Something has now been said of Coleridge's views on the nature of reason, as well as on its peculiar relation to the understanding in man. But of course he did not merely affirm these things as *ipse dixits.*[17] He believed he had demonstrated them. If we are now to try and follow the lines of his demonstration, it will be well to revert in the first place

to the topic of Chapter 1, where the point was made that thinking is not something that simply happens to us, but is our own act; and further that everyone, who has the will to do so, can convince himself of this fact. To apprehend the nature of reason, however, I have to take the further step of realising that, although thinking is my act, it is not "mine" in the sense that understanding uses the word *mine*.[18] This follows from the very nature of reason, which determines the nature of thought as such. My concept, although it is my act, is thus not my private property.[19] An inveterate assumption to the contrary is at the heart of the common difficulty, already referred to, of grasping the reality of reason. Yet it is an assumption which is at once removed by candid reflection on the nature of thought; reflection, that is, on its nature as immediately experienced and actually used; not of course reflection on hypothetical causes, whether physical or otherwise, since these are already products, posterior to and now remote from, the act that produced them. But such reflection is not a very popular pastime. Coleridge himself on one occasion beautifully christened our unspoken but obsessive, presumption that the same concept in two minds is two concepts and not one, as "the queen bee in the hive of error." [20]

It may be recalled from Chapter 1 that, in addition to reflecting upon it, Coleridge maintained that it is possible, though for most of us not easy, to *experience* the nature of thought, or rather of thinking as an *act,* by raising it from its normally unconscious function into a conscious one; and possibly the idea of an unconscious act of thought, becoming raised to consciousness, is less of a stumbling block to us than it was to his contemporaries. Indeed one way, for us, of approaching his whole conception of reason, is to think of it as "the unconscious"; with a corollary to the effect that the true significance of that word has been partly limited and partly distorted out of all recognition by various schools of psycho-analysis, to whom however (no small debt) we owe the widespread recognition of it as a reality. Coleridge's "consciousness, which lies beneath or (as it were) *behind* the spontaneous consciousness natural to all reflecting beings," * was not, like theirs, based on an initial presumption of fixed "outness" and all that flows from that by way of fancying ultimately physical sources.[21]

Exposition of the paradoxical, or self-contradictory, essence of reason was a task that by its very nature could do with all Coleridge's acuteness of logical analysis on the one hand and all his subtlety of psychological

---

* Chapter 8, p. 95, above.

experience and psychological analysis on the other; and he bestowed them liberally, his main point of attack being precisely this distinction between reason and understanding. We should perhaps remember the difficulty of the task, when we are minded, as we sometimes are, to criticise the means he adopted. Thus, it may annoy, but need not madden us, when we find him introducing his disquisition on Reason and Understanding in *Aids to Reflection* by quoting an Aphorism from Bishop Leighton, in which the Bishop says that "faith elevates the soul above reason" and speaks of "natural reason judging according to sense"; and when we find Coleridge not only pointing out that by "reason" here Leighton meant what he (Coleridge) calls "understanding," but, in order to drive the point home, making use of a sentence adapted from James Harrington in which Coleridge has first substituted the terms *understanding* and *reason* for the terms (*reason* and *religion*) which Harrington himself had actually employed.[22]

Always, and however laboriously, he is aiming to bring out (*a*) the two different *modes* in which reason operates; and (*b*) the two contradictory *aspects* of reason (on the one hand its individuality and on the other its universality, or superindividual nature).

The two aspects do not respectively correspond to the two modes; on the contrary both of them apply to both. In one mode reason is, positively, the act of self-consciousness; it is "conscious self-knowledge";[23] it is the I AM. In the other mode, it is present only negatively, or unself-consciously, to the understanding. In both modes however it is the superindividual so acting as to individualise.

Thus, as we saw in the previous chapter, reason, via the understanding, enables a mind's total detachment from 'nature,' that is, it enables subjectivity. But it does this by making possible *abstraction,* that is generalising, that is, experiencing objects in terms of 'universals.' The power to generalise and abstract depends in its turn on the power to *compare,* that is, the power to analyse a vague impression of 'likeness' into the clear concepts of *difference* on the one hand and *sameness,* or identity, on the other. And, in the terminology of logic, that is to apprehend the fact of *contradiction*. A is A; and it is not B. It is at all events not "not-A." For the two conceptions contradict and exclude one another, and "reasoning [negative reason in the understanding] consists wholly in a man's power of seeing, whether any two conceptions, which happen to be in his mind, are, or are not, in contradiction with each other." [24]

Hence man's experience of detachment—and thus of himself as

autonomous unit—varies directly with the development of his understanding. But the development of his understanding also brings about another result. It reduces his knowledge of nature to knowledge of the mechanical in nature. This was a principal part of Coleridge's message to his contemporaries, with the addition that, in so far as nature is mechanical, it is *natura naturata;* it is nature without life—a truth which has become a good deal more widely realised since his time.[25]

But Coleridge also saw that this epistemological limitation of the mere understanding, properly understood, actually compels us to go a step further and realize that the human understanding is *not* 'mere.' If we pause to *contemplate* the absoluteness, for the understanding, of the principle of contradiction, we begin perforce to become aware of the "unindividual and transcendent character of the Reason" [26] that informs it. We become aware that rational understanding does indeed give us our subjectivity, our detachment; but that, by itself and untranscended, it gives no assurance of an external world,[27] and thus excludes the very possibility of knowledge. It tells us that the act, by which we have abstracted and combined, is *one* act;[28] but it tells us nothing else. Any actual knowledge of nature does in fact, whether we are fully aware of it or not, bring to bear, "the intelligence which is in the human mind above nature"—and therefore also above mere understanding.[29]

For what does the principle of contradiction, without more, offer to a mind? What does the mind obtain by "submitting all positions alike . . . to the criterion of the mere understanding"? * Quite literally nothing. The principle of contradiction tells us nothing of what nature, or anything else, *is*. It tells us only what it is *not;* and, in doing so, clenches our absurd detachment from it—which we perhaps choose to call our "analytical unity." Actuality escapes it altogether; this was the discovery of the Eleatic school, and the weapon of the Sophists. What does it mean to say a car "begins to move"? As far as the understanding is concerned, it is either already moving, or it is at rest. Beginning, change, motion itself, development, evolution, life—anything whatever that is *naturans* as well as *naturata*—eludes the rigorous *either:or* of the mere understanding plus the senses.[30]

The "step further" which Coleridge was calling on his contemporaries to take was, once again, to pass on from the product to the producent. Now the immediate product of reason in the understanding

---

* Chapter 8, p. 101, above.

is the principle of contradiction. But only that which itself transcends two contradictories can have produced them. Thus, if we do not remain wilfully blind, our attention is drawn, by the truth in contradiction itself to "the truths of reason." It is indeed a "test and sign" of any truth of reason that *"it can come forth out of the moulds of the understanding only in the disguise of two contradictory conceptions."* [31]

Thus, by contemplating contradiction, the mind is propelled from "the outward sense" to "the mind's eye"; from superficial accuracy about the unknown to the depth of actual knowledge. And what is it that is known? The producent of products in contradiction with one another. But that is only a rather more Latin way of saying: "One Power manifesting as two forces." The first step towards apprehending reason, as active, is thus the apprehension of polarity; it is to apprehend reason as "productive unity," as "separative projection," as "the tendency at once to individuate and to connect, to detach, but so as either to retain or to reproduce attachment." Such, or of such a nature, is the background-thinking of which we should be aware when, for example, we hear Coleridge drily affirming that the ideas of reason are "constitutive" and not (as Kant held) merely "regulative." [32]

The moonlight of reason negative in the understanding can prompt the mind's eye to turn towards the positive sunshine, of which it is the pale and the dead reflection.[33] To do so is to proceed from *natura naturata* into *natura naturans;* it is to pass on from fancy's business of arranging and re-arranging the "products of destruction, the *cadavera rerum,*" [34] to imagination's business with "the existence of absolute life," which is "the correlative of truth." [35]

Polarity, being "incompatible with the mathematical calculus," is not graspable by the understanding, but only in the imagination; in fact we have already had occasion to specify it as the basic act of imagination.* The present chapter and the preceding one are really only a fuller statement of that position. Separative projection "comes forth out of the moulds of the understanding" as the absurd equation, $1 = 2$; imagination as its converse, $2 = 1$.[36] It is perhaps worth pausing here to remark that the interest, steadily increasing over the last fifty years, taken by those who have a feeling for imagination in poetry and in language generally, in the nature of simile and metaphor seems to indicate a dawning awareness of this. It is realised, though not always explicitly,

---

* Chapter 3, p. 36, Chapter 4, p. 52, above.

that the meaning-content of a metaphor is destroyed if we look in it, as Aristotle did, for a *tertium comparationis;* that is to say, if we force it into the moulds of the understanding by analysing the likeness, on which it is based, into sameness on the one hand and difference on the other. To experience metaphor *as* metaphor, on the other hand, is to experience likeness as a *polarity* between sameness and difference;[37] and there is a similar contrast underlying the distinction between allegory and symbol, or allegory and myth.[38]

The place of imagination, between reason and understanding in the gamut of mental powers, becomes more clearly evident. "Even in France," wrote Coleridge on a copy of the 1818 recension of the *Friend,* "I see more to *hope,* than in Britain. It is wonderful, how closely Reason and Imagination are connected, and Religion the union of the two." While, from the other direction, "The completing power which unites clearness with depth, the plenitude of the sense with the comprehensibility of the understanding, is the imagination, impregnated with which the understanding itself becomes intuitive, and a living power." [39] Swallowed up by the understanding, positive reason becomes the negative reason of logic, which is however still necessary, which is indeed the ground we stand on, which is still reason. *Linked* to it through imagination, reason retains, or recovers, her manage and mastery as positive reason; and the understanding is then "employed in the service of the pure reason." [40] A year or two earlier he had observed in the *Statesman's Manual* that "The histories and political economy of the present and preceding century partake in the general contagion of its mechanic philosophy, and are the product of an unenlivened general understanding. In the Scriptures they are the living educts of the imagination"; and it is at this point that he continues with what Professor W. J. Bate has called "perhaps his most specific definition" of imagination:[41]

> that reconciling and mediatory power, which incorporating the reason in images of the sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the senses by the permanence and self-circling energies of the reason, gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths of which they are the conductors.[42]

Reason then is one power, of which the forces in any manifestation are inevitably two. We are endeavouring to reserve Coleridge's theology for a subsequent chapter, but, as already observed, the nature

of his system is such that absolutely serial treatment is impossible to maintain. He is so frequently depicted as having most ingeniously and artificially, even a little dishonestly, combined what, without the help of a smoke-screen, it is almost impossible to keep separate: for example, the concept of the Logos, or creative Word, which was never very far from his mind, and the substantially un-Darwinian, because un-Cartesian, concept of evolution that found embodiment in his *Theory of Life*. Reason is being; but that is another way of saying that reason is God;[43] and indeed the polarity, God)(Man, is the basis of all polarity, in nature and elsewhere.[44] Just as, psychologically, it is reason which enables the experience of unity, but it is also reason which enables the experience of absolute contradiction, so God is the ground of the unity between God and man, but also of the distinction between them; and that distinction is itself the ground of all other distinctities—including the distinctities, whether of so-called 'kind' or 'degree,' in nature; since the process of psychology and the process of nature are not in fact two separate processes, but one and the same, namely: "the increase of consciousness in such wise that whatever part of the *terra incognita* of our nature the increased consciousness discovers, our will may conquer and bring into subjection to itself under the sovereignty of reason." [45]

In the same way, we have endeavoured both here and in Chapter 1 to state absolutely the paradox of individuality (it is *my* act) and universality (*it is superindividual*) inherent in thinking itself.[46] But there would be a certain artificiality—it is after all the separation, not the combination that is artificial—in isolating this idea from that of the incarnate word, from the wisdom, in the Christian tradition, of John and Paul. There is a certain artificiality in demonstrating that "I" am also "not I," without so much as a reference to St. Paul's "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me." [47] Within this frame of reference "the Word or Logos is life, and communicates life" (the entire life-process culminating in the individual understanding); but it is also "light, and communicates light"; and this light is positive reason; whereas the negative reason, which alone the understanding can be said to "possess," is only "the capability with which God had endowed man of beholding, or being conscious of the divine light." Yet that capability is, itself also, the light[48]—though not immediately; and although the darkness of the mere understanding in which it resides may fail to comprehend and use it.[49]

Here, at the close of two relatively abstract chapters, it may be well

to listen as well to another way Coleridge found of portraying the nature of reason; a way more in tune with the shy approaches to these matters that win approval in the twentieth century. It is his interpretation of the myth of Prometheus:[50]

> The generation of the *nous,* or pure reason in man. 1. It was superadded or infused, *a supra* to mark that it was no mere evolution of the animal basis—that it could not have grown out of the other faculties of man, his life, sense, understanding, as the flower grows out of the stem, having pre-existed potentially in the seed: 2. The *nous,* or fire, was 'stolen'—to mark its *hetero-* or rather its *allo-*geneity, that is, its diversity, its difference in kind, from the faculties which are common to man with the nobler animals: 3. And stolen 'from Heaven'—to mark its superiority in kind, as well as its essential diversity: 4. And it was a 'spark'—to mark that it is not subject to any modifying reaction from that on which it immediately acts; that it suffers no change, and receives no accession, from the inferior, but multiplies itself by conversion, without being alloyed by, or amalgamated with, that which it potentiates, ennobles, and transmutes: 5. And lastly (in order to imply the homogeneity of the donor and of the gift), it was stolen by a 'god', and a god of the race before the dynasty of Jove—Jove the binder of reluctant powers, the coercer and entrancer of free spirits under the fetters of shape, and mass, and passive mobility; but likewise by a god of the same race and essence with Jove, and linked of yore in closest and friendliest intimacy with him. This, to mark the pre-existence, in order of thought, of the *nous,* as spiritual, both to the objects of sense, and to their products, formed, as it were, by the precipitation, or, if I may adopt the bold language of Leibnitz, by a coagulation of spirit.
>
> In other words this derivation of the spark from above, and from a god anterior to the Jovial dynasty—(that is, to the submersion of spirits in material forms)—was intended to mark the transcendency of the *nous,* the contra-distinctive faculty of man, as timeless, and, in this negative sense, eternal. It signified, I say, its superiority to, and its diversity from, all things that subsist in space and time, nay, even those which, though spaceless, yet partake of time, namely, souls or understandings. For the soul, or understanding, if it be defined physiologically as the principle of sensibility, irritability, and growth, together with the functions of the organs, which are at once the representatives of these, must be considered in *genere,* though not in degree or dignity, common to man and the inferior animals. It was the spirit, the *nous,* which man alone possessed.