I

Thoughts and Thinking

On the 17th of March 1801 Coleridge's eldest son, Hartley, then between four and five years old, was looking out of the study window at some mountains. Coleridge picked up a mirror. "I showed him," he records in a notebook,

> the whole magnificent Prospect in a Looking Glass, and held it up, so that the whole was like a Canopy or Ceiling over his head, and he struggled to express himself concerning the Difference between the Thing and the Image almost with convulsive Effort.—I never before saw such an Abstract of *Thinking* as a pure act and energy, of *Thinking* as distinguished from *Thoughts*.[1]

It is a good point at which to make our entry into Coleridge's own thoughts, that is to say into the whole coherently conceived, though fragmentarily expounded, structure which he sometimes referred to as his "system," at other times as the Dynamic Philosophy, and occasionally as the Constructive Philosophy.

Coleridge himself was twenty-eight at this time. Decades later Thomas Carlyle was to despise and describe the old man at Highgate still expatiating on the relation between "subject" and "object" (which, owing to a catarrhal affliction, he pronounced "sum-m-mject" and "om-m-mject"); and those few who have really endeavoured to master his philosophy are likely to have concluded that a grasp of this relation, as Coleridge saw it, is the *pons asinorum* of the whole endeavour. In fact, however, if the definitions of *subject* and *object,* and the true nature of the relation between them, are the *pons asinorum,* 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.

> Most of my readers will have observed a small-water-insect on the surface of rivulets, which throws a cinque-spotted shadow fringed with prismatic colours on the sunny bottom of the brook; and will have noticed, how the little animal *wins* its way up against the stream . . . This is no unapt emblem of the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking.[2]

We must however distinguish between energy and effort. Both Hartley Coleridge and the water-insect give evidence of something like a struggle. But this is not *necessarily* the case. In a notebook entry of 1803 Coleridge observes: "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." [3]

Coleridge did not always obey the commands he laid on himself in his notebooks, but in this instance he clearly did so. One could almost say that he hardly ever ceased thinking of it; or certainly that it was always at the back of his mind and of almost any doctrine he was propounding at the moment. There is evidence enough in his prose-writings throughout his life;* and, towards the end of it, in a work which was to have formed part of the "Magnum Opus" that he frequently referred to but never achieved, he advises the reader that the only way of overcoming a certain difficulty (to which we shall refer again shortly) is:

> . . . by placing yourself in such situations or as it were positions of mind as would be likely to call up that act in our intellectual being and then to attend to it so far as its necessary transient and subtle nature will permit . . . When connecting 2 bright stars, the one directly above the other as the extremities of the same line I seemed to have a something between a sense and a sensation of length more perfect than any actual filling up of the interval by a succession of points in contact would have given me. I seemed to find myself acting as it were in the construction of that length undisturbed by any accompanying perception of breadth or inequality which must needs accompany all pictures of a line . . . in other words it was a self-conscious act snatched away as it were from the product of that act.[4]

We have here an act which is normally performed unconsciously, though the *result* or *product* of the act is part of "the spontaneous consciousness natural to all reflecting beings." [5]

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* See for instance *Philosophical Lectures,* p. 115 ("To comprehend the philosophy of Pythagoras, the mind itself must be conceived of as an act"); p. 333; and elsewhere.

This is perhaps easiest to grasp in the case of geometry: "I need not I am sure tell you that a line upon a slate is but a picture of that act of the imagination which the mathematician alone consults." [6]

Mathematical lines, points and surfaces are "acts of the imagination that are one with the product of those acts." [7] And this remains true of the figures constructed with them. A geometrician draws three meeting lines on a slate; but the 'triangle' which he then sees merely represents to him (and imperfectly) an ideal figure he has first had to produce by an act of thought or (it is practically the same thing) an act of imagination.

> [the] spirit in man (that is, the will) shows its own state in and by its acts alone: even as in geometrical reasoning the mind knows its constructive faculty in the act of constructing, and contemplates the act in the product (that is, the mental figure or diagram) which is inseparable from the act and co-instantaneous.[8]

Both the act and the product of the act ("the mental figure or diagram") are already there before the pencil has touched the slate. They are inseparable from one another or normally so, but that does not entail that they are indistinguishable. Indeed it is precisely as we do begin to distinguish them that we come at "the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking."

Coleridge was perfectly clear about this distinction in his own mind. But he had the utmost difficulty in getting it across to his contemporaries—a generation, we should recall, which had not been familiarized by Freud and his followers with at least the *notion* of at least the possibility of there being such a thing as unconscious mental activity. In the following quotation we ought not to let ourselves be put off by Coleridge's use of the word *transcendental*. What he designated as *transcendental philosophy* is what we should be more likely today to call epistemology. It was no wise mystical. It was reasoning about thinking.[9]

> There is a *philosophic* (and inasmuch as it is actualized by an effort of freedom, an *artificial*) consciousness, which lies beneath or (as it were) *behind* the spontaneous consciousness natural to all reflecting beings. As the elder Romans distinguished their northern provinces into Cis-Alpine and Trans-Alpine, so may we divide all the objects of human knowledge into those on this side, and those on the other side of the spontaneous consciousness; *citra et trans conscientiam communem*. The latter is ex-

> clusively the domain of pure philosophy, which is therefore properly entitled *transcendental,* in order to discriminate it at once, both from mere reflection and *re*-presentation, on the one hand, and on the other from those flights of lawless speculation which, abandoned by *all* distinct consciousness, because transgressing the bounds and purposes of our intellectual faculties, are justly condemned as *transcendent.*[10]

But, though it is not mysticism, to reason about thinking does entail our being led inward from the product of thinking to the act itself. And this does require a certain discipline. Here is the root-cause of the charge of 'obscurity,' which was levelled during his life, and has so often been levelled since his death, against both Coleridge himself and his philosophy.

> A system, the first principle of which it is to render the mind intuitive of the spiritual in man (i.e. of that which lies *on the other side* of our natural consciousness) must needs have a great obscurity for those, who have never disciplined and strengthened this ulterior consciousness.[11]

It will have been noticed that, in the passages cited, the expressions "act of thinking" and "act of imagination" are treated as equivalent. This will call for further consideration later; but meanwhile it may help to prevent the mistake we might otherwise make of assuming that by the act of thinking all he means is 'attending.'

The difference between these two goes very deep and cannot really be grasped, as Coleridge apprehended it, without reference to his fundamental and well-known (though not often well-understood) distinction between Reason and Understanding. This, too, must await a later chapter. Meanwhile it may be observed that the difference between attending and thinking is perhaps most readily *experienced* in situations where the object of attention is itself a train of thought, and one which is being presented by another mind. We listen, let us say, to a lecture which is full of thought and deeply interesting, and which holds our attention from start to finish. A day or two later someone who was not there asks us: "What was the lecture like?" "Very good indeed!" "What did he say?" Whereupon we find ourselves completely at a loss; we just cannot answer, though we can recall plenty of disconnected observations. So it is not our memory which is at fault.

On another occasion, after the lecture is concluded, we summon up the energy to 'go through' it in our own minds, reproducing for ourselves

the main and subsidiary threads of the discourse. And this time, if we are asked the same question, we can answer it pretty satisfactorily. Or it may be a chapter from a book.

> 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.[12]

Elsewhere he speaks of the *effort* of attention and the *energy* of thought.[13] Attention, in spite of the effort it requires, is *intellectually* passive. "On whatever subject the mind feels a lively interest, attention, though always an effort, becomes a delightful effort." [14] But though the two motions of the mind must be carefully distinguished, they are also closely related—as is the case with understanding and reason. The lower is the only way to the higher and attention is "a habit or discipline without which the very word, thinking, must remain a thoughtless substitute for dreaming with our eyes open . . ." [15]

Coleridge once wrote in his notebook: "*A Thought* and Thoughts are quite different words from *Thought*—as a Fancy from Fancy, a Work from Work, a Life from Life, a Force and Forces from Force, a Feeling, a Writing, etc." [16] What he is pointing out is that, just as "a" work, which is a *thing,* is the finished product of 'work,' which is an *act,* so is "a" thought the product of the act of thought. When they are used in the singular and without the article before them, all these words are in effect participial, so that to use the term *thinking* (instead of *thought*) for the *act* makes the distinction clearer. Hitherto we have been concerned mainly with the act of thinking as he experienced and reflected on it. It remains to consider (observing his own verbal distinction) what Coleridge understood by 'a thought' or 'thoughts.'

It will be recalled that the *act* of thinking is normally performed unconsciously. By contrast, *thoughts* can be defined as all the content of consciousness in so far as that is not sense or feeling. It covers memories, speculations, fancies, theories, reverie and all else that goes on while we remain conscious. But not those alone. It is a truism today, though it was not in Coleridge's, that a great part, if not the whole, of what for practical purposes we classify as 'perception' includes a thought-component. The 'koenaesthesis,' as it is sometimes called, which constitutes

our experience of a common world external to and independent of ourselves, is derived from that component. Nature itself, so far as it has form and quality, is a compound of thoughts and perceptions.[17]

The difficulty here, as in the case of the act of thinking and its product, is that in ordinary life we never consciously experience the one separately from the other. We 'perceive,' as we say, an 'object,' but the object is already 'nature' in the above mentioned sense, that is to say, a construct owing, not to our senses but to our minds its total form, and thus its unity, and thus its presence *as* an object. A single percept, uncombined, unmodified and unadopted by any element of mental construction, is as much outside our normal experience as is pure thinking, uncombined with *any* element of representation borrowed from the senses.

Yet this does not alter the fact that thinking and perceiving are two clearly distinguishable functions, the one active and the other passive. Indeed that is part of what the words *mean*. Whatever his views on the subject of free will and determinism, it remains true for everyman that thinking is self-originated in a way that perceiving is not. Thinking is, by contrast, something which (however unconsciously) he *does;* perceiving is, by contrast, something which he suffers.

Put that way, the point may perhaps seem so obvious as to be scarcely worth making. But there was in Coleridge's day a strong current of philosophical and scientific thought which was founded on the denial of precisely this distinction. There was for example the philosophy of Hume and there was the associationist psychology of David Hartley, which had played so great a part in Coleridge's own intellectual development.[18] In our own day we are familiar enough with the behaviourist upholders of the same tradition. This refusal to *distinguish* between thinking and perceiving, and thus between the mind and the senses, was (so Coleridge divined) based on the fact, to which attention has just been drawn, that the two are in practice found to be inseparable. And it is for this reason that we so frequently find him turning aside from a particular topic he is pursuing to expose on general grounds the fallacy implicit in the assumption that we cannot 'really' distinguish components we cannot divide.

The assumption is as strange as it is persistent. Water can be really separated into drops—but each drop is no less really composed of hydrogen and oxygen, in spite of the fact that we cannot, as long as it remains water, separate the one from the other. Coleridge attributed the pre-

valence of this mental blind spot to what he sometimes referred to as "the despotism of the eye." But we will pursue our present policy of letting him speak for himself:

> In order to obtain adequate notions of any truth, we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts; and this is the technical process of philosophy. But having done so, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity in which they actually co-exist; and this is the result of philosophy.[19]

Again:

> 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.[20]

The second ("still worse") type of mind is evidently not worse by being still *more* dull and obtuse, but rather the opposite; for it is the type of mind which possesses 'keenness' without subtlety:

> Few men of genius are keen; but almost every man of genius is subtle. If you ask me the difference between keenness and subtlety, I answer that it is the difference between a point and an edge. To split a hair is no proof of subtlety; for subtlety acts in distinguishing differences—in showing that two things apparently one are in fact two; whereas to split a hair is to cause division, and not to ascertain a difference.[21]

> Distinct *notions* do not suppose different things. When I make a threefold distinction in human nature, I am 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, the ignorance or perversion of them being alike injurious . . .[22]

Now let us hear him on the psychological source of this still very prevalent assumption that we cannot distinguish except where we can divide; or that, if we do so, the distinction is 'unreal.'

> Under that despotism of the eye (the emancipation from which Pythagoras by his *numeral,* and Plato by his *musical* symbols, and both by geometric discipline, aimed at, as the first *propaideutikon* of the mind) —under this strong sensuous influence, 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.[23]

. . . Locke told us, in defining words, we ought to have distinct images or conceptions . . .[24]

Now it is clear that the materialist excludes all facts that are not immediately the objects of his senses. By his very hypothesis he cannot have a theory, for he determines first of all rather to place effect for cause than to concede any one thing which his reason dictates if his senses do not at the same time give him a picture of it.[25]

Thus, as materialism has generally been taught, it is utterly unintelligible, and owes all its proselytes to the propensity so common among men, to mistake distinct images for clear conceptions; and vice versa, to reject as inconceivable whatever from its own nature is unimaginable. But as soon as it becomes intelligible, it ceases to be materialism.[26]

. . . this difficulty* . . . arises wholly out of That Slavery of the Mind to the Eye and the visual Imagination or Fancy under the influence of which the Reasoner must have a *picture* and mistakes surface for substance.[27]

There is an interesting corollary to the above quotations, and particularly perhaps to the first two of them. Coleridge rarely let slip an opportunity of emphasising "the great advantages to be obtained from the habit of tracing the proper meaning and history of words"; and we find him towards the end of his life vigorously recommending this discipline as a means towards liberating mind from sense. Perhaps, in a history-conscious age it is a likelier one than those formerly adopted by Pythagoras and Plato.

In disciplining the mind one of the first rules should be, to lose no opportunity of tracing words to their origin; one good consequence of which will be, that he will be able to use the *language* of sight without being enslaved by its affections. He will at least save himself from the delusive notion, that what is not *imageable* is likewise not *conceivable.*

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* The reference is to Milton's over the notion of creation out of 'nothing,' which led him to "assert the eternity of Matter to escape from it."

> To emancipate the mind from the despotism of the eye is the first step towards its emancipation from the influences and intrusions of the senses, sensations and passions generally. Thus most effectively is the power of abstraction to be called forth, strengthened and familiarized, and it is this power of abstraction that chiefly distinguishes the human understanding from that of the higher animals—and in the different degrees in which this power is developed, the superiority of man over man largely consists.
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> Hence we are to account for the preference which the divine Plato gives to expressions taken from objects of the ear, as terms of Music and Harmony, and in part at least for the numerical symbols, in which Pythagoras clothed his philosophy.[28]

Tinted glasses make the clearest blue sky look leaden and overcast. Coleridge will continue to be called 'cloudy' even by his admirers, because he will continue to be misinterpreted by readers who are not willing to grasp, and to remember once they *have* grasped, the elementary principles which consciously permeate almost every other sentence he constructs, and which it is hoped the foregoing quotations sufficiently illustrate. These are: first, that thinking is an act. Secondly, that it is normally, though not necessarily and always, an unconscious act. Thirdly, that though we are not normally conscious of the act, we *are* normally conscious of the product of the act (which we call 'thoughts'), and indeed it is this, which actually constitutes our self-consciousness as human beings.

It must not be thought, because a number of the quotations selected instance occasions when the act itself did become conscious—"snatched away as it were from the product" *—that Coleridge rested the validity of his system on abnormal experience. He held that the peculiar relation between act and product is implicit in the very concept of thought or mind;[29] and that this can be demonstrated by analysis. Indeed he spent a large part of his energies in seeking to demonstrate precisely this, by every means in his power and at every opportunity that offered itself.

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* See p. 14, above.