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Naturata and Naturans

In nature nothing remains constant. Everything is in a perpetual state of transformation, motion and change. However, we discover that nothing simply surges up out of nothing without having antecedents that existed before. I believe nothing ever disappears without a trace, in the sense that it gives rise to absolutely nothing existing at later times. This general characteristic of the world can be expressed in terms of a principle which summarises an enormous domain of different kinds of experience and which has never yet been contradicted in any observation or experiment, scientific or otherwise; namely, everything comes from other things and gives rise to other things.

This principle is not yet a statement of the existence of causality in nature. Indeed, it is even more fundamental than is causality, for it is at the foundation of the possibility of our understanding nature in a rational way.

David Bohm: *Causality and Chance in Modern Physics;*
Chapter 1, Introduction.[1]

THIS is a concept of nature which Coleridge would have approved and accepted. Nature was, for him "the term in which we comprehend all things that are representable in the forms of time and space, and subjected to the relations of cause and effect: and the cause of the existence of which, therefore, is to be sought for perpetually in something antecedent." [2] Characteristically, he adds that the word itself expresses this in the strongest manner possible: "*Natura,* that which is about to be born, that which is always *becoming*." [3] *Natura* is of course the Latin rendering of Greek *physis* and, as Bohm begins by pointing out, it is this fundamental principle—the nature of Nature as a whole—with which the science of Physics is concerned.

But at this point the Coleridgean analysis takes a further step which differentiates his concept of nature sharply from that of most, if not all, modern physicists. To investigate scientifically the nature of Nature is to investigate the nature of phenomena as such. It is to ask the question: What is a phenomenon? True, "everything comes from other things and gives rise to other things." Of any particular phenomenon we can say, tracing the chain of cause and effect: "this comes from such and such another phenomenon or group of phenomena." But if it is really the origin of phenomena *as such* that we are seeking to investigate, there must come a point where this answer will no longer serve: "the solution of phenomena can never be derived from phenomena." [4]

Thus, the question: What is a particle? can never be answered in terms of "the relation of unproductive particles to each other." [5] Yet this is precisely the solution which the physical science of Coleridge's day was looking for. We are not at the moment concerned with the question whether the same is true of the physics of our own day, but it may be remarked that the concept of the 'field,' supplementing that of the particle if not replacing it altogether, has no doubt done something towards emancipating modern physics from "the despotism of the eye." [6]

The essence of the natural process is that it is 'productive,' in the wide sense of evolving phenomena from other phenomena,[7] and Coleridge held it to be a logical absurdity to suppose that this productive *power* is the same kind of thing as the phenomena themselves.

What then can be said, what can be ascertained about productive nature, as distinguished in thought from already produced (that is, phenomenal) nature? The proper answer to this question was one of the main concerns of Coleridge's life, and we may begin by quoting his opinion of what it is *not:*

> —Aristotle's definitions of nature are all grounded on the petty and rather rhetorical than philosophical *antithesis* of nature to art—a conception inadequate to the demands even of his philosophy. Hence in the progress of his reasoning, he confounds the *natura naturata* (that is, the sum total of the facts and phenomena of the senses) with an hypothetical *natura naturans,* a Goddess Nature, that has no better claim to a place in any sober system of natural philosophy than the Goddess *Multitudo*;[8]

It is not of course the mere concept of a *natura naturans*—a nature linguistically denotable only by adding a verb to the noun, a nature

'naturing'—that Coleridge is objecting to here. On the contrary, it is one that he frequently uses himself:

> —in speaking of the world without us as distinguished from ourselves, the aggregate of phenomena ponderable and imponderable, is called nature in the passive sense,—in the language of the old schools, *natura naturata*—while the sum or aggregate of the powers inferred as the sufficient causes of the forms (which by Aristotle and his followers were called the substantial forms) is nature in the active sense, or *natura naturans*.[9]

What he criticises is, firstly, Aristotle's failure to *distinguish* clearly between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* and, secondly, his attempt to remedy the defect by the hypothesis of a Goddess.

We may speak of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata;* or we may say that, in addition to the phenomena, there are the so-called 'laws' of nature, without which it is impossible to understand the phenomena. The laws themselves are not phenomenal and we only become aware of them in their effects. But we have, all the same, to distinguish them from the phenomena themselves. They are not the less real because they are not things.

Thus, the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* reveals itself as resembling in quality that distinction between the act of thought and its product, which was discussed in the previous chapter—*natura naturata* being "the productive power suspended and, as it were, quenched in the product." [10]

It was the refusal of science to realise, or even consider, this principle that provoked Coleridge into such extreme pronouncements as we find, for instance, in the *Statesman's Manual,* where he casually remarks that "we have not yet attained to a science of nature." [11] He held that a true system must be grounded neither in a *thing* nor an *abstraction*.[12] And it is the inexorable presupposition in the minds of his readers, that whatever is not a thing *must* be an abstraction, which, more than perhaps anything else, has prevented his own system from being understood. In particular it has prevented them from even grasping, at the outset, what such a term as *natura naturans* signifies. For, once the author has made it clear that what he is talking about is not a thing, it is mentally docketed by 99.9 per cent of them as an abstraction. In fact, however, Coleridge's *natura naturans* is no more of an abstraction than, for instance, gravitation.

Natura naturans is supersensuous, but not supernatural. It has nothing to do with those 'occult qualities,' whose final expulsion (or intended expulsion) from the domain of science was one of the major achievements of the scientific revolution. Coleridge emphasised this on more than one occasion.[13] We shall see that, so far from reintroducing occult qualities, he considered his concept of spirit, as the antithesis or correlative to 'nature,' to be the only possible means of *eliminating* those occult qualities which in fact remain surreptitiously present in the vocabulary of science. There were not a few of them still left in Coleridge's time, and there are still some today. Comte complained long ago that the admission of so-called 'forces' into that vocabulary (the "force of gravity" for instance) was a relic of primitive animism. An 'occult quality' is anything that is deemed to possess an exclusively objective existence, in spite of being imperceptible.

This was the case with the hypothetical 'ether' to which so much speculative attention was directed during the earlier part of the time between Newton's day and our own. But it is equally true of any other 'plenum,' or hypothetical space-filler, conceived in the phenomenal mode, in order to solve the old problem of action at a distance—a problem indeed (he held), if not an absurdity, to all men who presuppose 'nature' to mean the *naturata* alone, in artificial abstraction from the totality which must include also the *naturans*.

We will conclude this chapter with an extract from Coleridge's notes written on his copy of the *De Divisione Naturae* of John Scotus Erigena:

> Such men, and their name is *legion*—consequently *demand* a *Matter* as a *Datum*. As soon as this gross prejudice is cured by the appropriate discipline and the Mind is familiarised to the contemplation of Matter as a product in time, the resulting Phenomenon of the equilibrium of the two antagonist Forces, Attraction and Repulsion, *that* the Negative and *this* the Positive Pole . . . the idea of *Creation* alone remains.[14]

In the chapter that follows we shall find that we cannot direct our attention on these "two antagonist Forces" and enquire what Coleridge meant by them, without finding ourselves in territory with which the average student of Coleridge's prose is already familiar.