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THE MEMORY OF HUME'S AND PALEY'S NATURAL THEOLOGY IN COLERIDGE'S AIDS TO REFLECTION

Keywords: *morality; memory; natural theology; empiricism; sensibility; anthropomorphism.*

Abstract: *The Aids to Reflection, Coleridge's most influential theological work, is in a strong polemic with two very important works on religion – David Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and William Paley's Natural Theology. The main focus of the present paper will therefore be that of outlining Coleridge's perspective with reference to Hume and Paley's views on natural theology. In doing so, it will hopefully become clear that an empiricist account of religion can only amount to the apologetic genre of natural theology. On the one hand, by showing his interest towards the cultural history of natural theology, Coleridge exposes the poverty of empiricism and its inability to move past demonstrations of God's existence and arrive at a spiritual understanding of the self in relation to God. On the other hand, he re-categorizes Reason, by rediscovering its original meaning as Logos and positing it as the structure on which true morality should be build, unlike in the empiricist system of common-sense ethics. The characters from Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion assert the consequences of living in a sceptical and empirical mindframe. Coleridge not only combats such attitudes, he also asserts the need to think in terms of Platonic and Kantian otherworldliness and rethink spirituality. He is no Christian dogmatist however, so questions such as what is the true faith are open in Coleridge's open, aphoristic and dialogical construction that makes up Aids to Reflection. In discussing the three philosophers, I bore in mind Renate Lachmann's concept of participation in the sense that the three texts are distancing and surpassing one another.*

S.T. Coleridge felt that the meaning of religion was downgraded by philosophers' discussions about natural theology, among which I am most interested in those of David Hume and William Paley. The following quote captures very well one of Coleridge's anxieties around 1825, the year *Aids to Reflection* was published: "I more than fear the prevailing taste for books of Natural Theology" (Coleridge, *Aids* 272). From the outset, I would like to signal that the present paper seeks to shed some light on two opposing philosophical camps – one the one hand, exponents of the Lockean school of eighteenth century philosophy, namely Hume and Paley, and on the other hand, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Christian philosophy of religion in its later form (am I not discussing

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what the scholarly literature dubs his early or his middle period by mainly referring to works such as *Lectures on Revealed Religion* (1795) or *Biographia literaria* [1817]). As Elinor Shaffer rightly informs us, “the late Coleridge is itself a conception formed and deformed by the remains of political, rationalist and gender ideologies, and their subsets in ‘Eng Lit’”, therefore this period of Coleridge’s work deserves more attention from scholars. This is no easy task, however, as Shaffer adds, “we have no accurate or adequate conception of the late Coleridge from 1819 to his death in 1834” (Shaffer, “Ideologies in Readings of the Late Coleridge: Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit”).

The main focus of the present paper will therefore be that of outlining Coleridge’s perspective with reference to Hume and Paley’s views on natural theology. In doing so, it will hopefully become clear that an empiricist account of religion can only amount to the apologetic genre of natural theology. On the one hand, by showing his interest towards the cultural history of natural theology, Coleridge exposes the poverty of empiricism and its inability to move past demonstrations of God’s existence and arrive at a spiritual understanding of the self in relation to God. On the other hand, Coleridge’s term *spiritual religion* seems pleonastic, since the category *religion* always seems to imply a *spiritual* component. However, the term *natural religion* is equally problematic, since it is at enmity with traditional religious concepts such as revelation/ illumination, sin/punishment, or the afterlife. In his posthumous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), David Hume announces the collapse of the religious dialogue. Discussing the argument from design, the characters Philo and Cleanthes agree that anthropomorphism plays a strong role in the making of any religion. More dramatically, Philo thinks that the debate between skeptics and dogmatists is “at the bottom, verbal and admits not of any precise determination” (Hume, *Dialogues* 130).

The memory of Hume and Paley’s natural theology becomes important for Coleridge’s rejection of its principles as they appear in the works of the two philosophers. Since this is a study in cultural memory, or more appropriately a study in the history of ideas where philosophers read or misread one another it seems on a par with the concepts of *participation* (proposed by Renate Lachmann) and of *process* (proposed by Ann Rigney). Also, the current literature on cultural memory privileges, as Lachmann states, “acts of memory... [and] their distancing and surpassing of precursor texts” (Lachmann 305). In Lachmann’s view, participation in the source text is “the dialogical sharing in the texts of a culture that occurs in writing” (idem). Christianity, and implicitly its source text, the Holy Bible, as it is appropriated by Coleridge, is not reduced to a series of commandments, but is a Living Process: “Christianity is not a Theory, but a Life” (Coleridge, *Aids* 259). Hume, on the other hand, thinks that discussions around matters of faith are “purely verbal” (Hume, *Dialogues* 130). As for Paley, whose discourse centers on arguments for the existence of God in animate and inanimate nature, proved indeed there is an *anima mundi*, but this had nothing in common with Coleridge’s belief in “Repentance in the Gospel sense” (Coleridge, *Aids* 106).

If David Hume was a philosophical skeptic and an opponent of religion even on his deathbed, William Paley’s role in British religious philosophy is

equally important. Paley's works and especially his *Natural Theology* (1802) constitute vehicles for keeping alive faith and natural piety: "for Paley it [*Natural Theology*] represented piety in its purest form" (O'Flaherty 21). In this text, Paley employs two narrative devices: rational argument, on the one hand, used to persuade the reader, and impression, used to fix a certain proposition in the memory (O'Flaherty 23). Paley calls out towards Christians to embrace natural theology:

The world from thenceforth (if one embraces natural theology) becomes a temple, and life itself one continued act of adoration. The change is no less than this, that, whereas formerly God was seldom in our thoughts, we can now scarcely look upon any thing without perceiving its relation to him (Paley 278-279).

One of the texts empiricism encouraged and produced from the seventeenth century until 1802 (the year Paley published his *Natural Theology*) were evidences of God in Nature, called natural theologies or books on natural religion. According to Paley, "the works of nature want only to be contemplated" (Paley 279). These books were still in fashion in 1825, when Coleridge published *Aids to Reflection*: "I more than fear, the prevailing taste for books of Natural Theology, Physico-Theology, Demonstrations of God from Nature, *Evidences* of Christianity, and the like. Evidences of Christianity! I am weary of the word." (Coleridge, *Aids* 272). The author is displeased with such extrinsic accounts of God since he was more a seeker of internal evidence. For Coleridge, critic Douglas Hedley notes, it is "spiritual evidence" that prevails over any other form of Christian worship:

Christian theology must be based upon this 'spiritual evidence' rather than the apparent order of the physical cosmos, or the external miracles performed by Christ; the latter two form of evidence providing the foundations of much Unitarian apologetic and the work of William Paley (Hedley, "Coleridge as a Theologian" 490).

Exasperated by the lack of Christology and Scriptural hermeneutics in Paley's texts, Coleridge remarks that there is no public intellectual who deems it necessary to tackle such a topic:

all the words and passages in the New Testament which express and contain the *peculiar* doctrines of Christianity, the paramount objects of the Christian Revelation, all those which speak so strongly of the value, benefit, and efficacy, of the death of Christ, assuredly mean *something*; but *what* they mean, nobody, it seems can tell! But doubtless we shall discover it, and be convinced that there is a substantial sense belonging to these words - in a future state! (Coleridge, *Aids* 274)

Despite Coleridge's 'intolerance' towards the philosophical genre of natural theology, the author himself gave the genre a try in *Aids to Reflection* in at

least one significant passage. In this passage, Coleridge re-enacts the principle of plenitude, as part of the eighteenth-century Great chain of Being, an ideology famously presented by Arthur Lovejoy in his seminal work *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (1936). Invoking the unity of the world is Coleridge's way of re-inscribing the Great Chain of Being with Man's active participation. The cosmos may be conceived hierarchically, but it is also Man's desire to climb up the Chain to God, through a harmonious collaboration of the human, but divinely endowed faculties:

In the world we see everywhere evidences of a Unity, which the component parts are so far from explaining, that they necessarily pre-suppose it as the cause and condition of their existing as those parts; or even of their existing at all. This antecedent Unity, or Cause and Principle of each Union, it has since the time of Bacon and Kepler been customary to call a law. (Coleridge, *Aids* 40)

The argument from design is problematized by William Paley in Chapter XXIV of his *Natural Theology*. Here, the theologian tackles the natural attributes of the Deity. Every law has an author, according to him: "But what do we mean by the laws of nature, or by any law? Effects are produced by power, not by laws. A law cannot execute itself. A law refers us to an agent" (Paley 232). The optimism of the eighteenth century concerning the principle of plenitude is mocked at by David Hume at the end of Chapter XI of his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. The philosopher believes that optimism to be just a fashion of those times:

Formerly it was a most popular theological topic to maintain, that human life was vanity and misery, and to exaggerate all the ills and pains, which are incident to men. But of late years, divines, we find, begin to retract this position, and maintain, though still with some hesitation, that there are more goods than evils, more pleasures than pains, even in this life (Hume, *Dialogues* 123).

In *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge explains the faults of religious utilitarianism¹ in a short chapter entitled "Paley not a Moralist". Empiricism, with its focus on the agent, gave the Will of God a secondary role when it comes to "Ethical Science" (Coleridge, *Aids* 197). Coleridge is more interested in the spiritual drive, or, if you will, the motivation behind the deed: "Not the outward deed, constructive, destructive, or neutral, - not the deed as a possible object of the senses, - is the object of Ethical Science" (Coleridge, *Aids* 197). Freedom, an essential component in ethics, can only be considered in its absoluteness and perfection if it is united with the will of God. This view is contrasted with the

¹ The source of religious utilitarianism, the reverse coin of secular utilitarianism, is Francis Hutcheson's principle of moral conduct in the text entitled *An Inquiry Concerning the Original of Our Ideas of Virtue or Moral Good* (1725) (Crimmins 16108). Locke was also interested in the relationship between virtue and religion. In the work entitled *Some Thoughts concerning Education*, he states that "virtue and religion are necessary for happiness" (Yolton 316).

agent's particular will. For Coleridge, the agent needs to acknowledge the Biblical dictum "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). Referring to William Paley, critic Niall O'Flaherty talks of theological utilitarianism. In the latter's view, "the moralist should impart rules of right action in a manner that maximized their likelihood of becoming principles of action" (O' Flaherty 22).

In the last lines of this short chapter, Coleridge makes use of the metaphor of the organic whole and comments on the biblical passage from James, stressing the importance of the agent's coherent actions:

For as the Will or Spirit, the Source and Substance of Moral Good, is one and all in every part; so must it be the totality, the whole articulated series of single acts, taken as unity, that can alone, in the severity of science, be recognized as the proper counterpart and adequate representative of a good Will (Coleridge, *Aids* 197).

The last two phrases from Coleridge's chapter seem to come to terms with Paley's outlook on Nature and God in the work entitled *Natural Theology*. Coleridge says that "the law of life" reflects itself in the entire body, an idea that much resembles Paley's insistence that God's design is noticeable everywhere, in every plant, insect or animal. The final sentence represents a Coleridgean anxiety about the part and the whole: "Much less, then, can the law of the Spirit work in fragments" (Coleridge, *Aids* 197). This last sentence is a possible critique of Hume's view of 'sensations' and of the idea that agents perceive the world in disconnected fragments. Discussing Hume's notion of causality, philosopher A. J. Ayer states that "there could be no necessary connection between distinct events. All that remains, then, is a series of fleeting 'perceptions' with no external object, no enduring subject to whom they could belong [...]" (Ayer 200).

Yet another attack on Paley's views can be traced in the last pages of *Aids to Reflection*, where Coleridge acknowledges Paley's literary fame. Nevertheless, he feels it his duty "to throw the whole force of [his] intellect in the way of this triumphal car, on which the tutelary genius of modern Idolatry is borne, even at the risk of being crushed under the wheels!" (Coleridge, *Aids* 273). In the 'Conclusion' of *Aids to Reflection*, the philosopher aims to correct the abuses of empiricism towards religion. In doing so, Coleridge tries to establish Spiritual Religion on firmer grounds.

In the work entitled *The Philosophical Lectures* (1818), Coleridge criticizes Hume for ignoring Locke's theory of reflection: "everywhere, it is argued, you have no real truth but what is derived from your sense. It is vain to talk of your ideas of reflection, for what are they? They must have been originally in our senses, or there is no ground for them" (Coleridge, *The Philosophical* 381). Although there is no explicit mention of Hume in Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, there are aspects of Hume's philosophy that have been directly confronted in several passages of Coleridge's text. In Book III, section V of the *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), Hume states that the source of morality is not *reason*, but *sentiment*: "All morality depends upon our sentiments" (Hume, *A Treatise* 517).

Hume explains the psychology of moral conduct “in terms of a theory of ‘moral sentiments’ rather than motives supplied by pleasures and pains” (Crimmins 16108). Although Hume’s epistemology can be considered sceptical, his views on morality are non-sceptical and in consensus with the eighteenth century common sense school.

To return to *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge is highly critical of the role *sensibility* played in the philosophy of Hobbes or in the philosophy of French Naturalists such as Buffon. Generally, in empiricism, “the mind is entirely passive”, hence Coleridge’s criticism towards the passive nature of sensibility (Hipolito 557). He also adds that sensibility is not necessarily synonymous with benevolence. Sensibility is not assigned any spiritual role since nobody undergoes purification from an excess of sensibility. In short, sensibility plays no ethical role; on the contrary, it leads to “trifles, effeminate selfishness...cold benevolence... [and] slothful Loves” (Coleridge, *Aids* 23).

Corrupted by Vice and Seduction, sensibility only wears the “cloak” of virtue, sensibility being neither a moral principle, nor “a sure pledge of a good heart” (ibidem 22). This discussion may seem inappropriate for anyone not acquainted with Coleridge’s moral philosophy. An outspoken critic of empiricism, Coleridge attacks the common-sense view that morality coupled with the understanding (the faculty judging according to sense) are at the very basis of an ethical system. Instead, he proposes that Reason as Divine Logos be the true base on which morality (again, coupled with the understanding) is built. When it comes to religion, the appeal to sensibility produces “indefinite sensations” (Coleridge, *Aids* 271) about the deity. The counterpoise to sensibility is the Christian concept of Love because it “lays claim to permanence only under the form of Duty . . . [and it is] the sealing Act of Moral Election” (Coleridge, *Aids* 26).

Unlike John Locke, who believed that the ultimate source of morality is God (cf. Yolton 148), Hume severs ethics from any form or religious epistemology, unable to find a compatible ground between empiricism and theism: “Hume saw what Locke had not: that theism was fundamentally incompatible with empiricism” (Hyman 35). Although the three characters of *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* agree that they will only discuss the attributes of God, but not his being, the question of God’s existence reappears throughout the work: for instance, Cleanthes, the advocate of anthropomorphism, affirms that “the author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man” (Hume, *Dialogues* 53).

In the *Dialogues*, the philosopher uses his three characters in order to sketch three possible attitudes towards natural religion. According to A. J. Ayer, Demea stands for an *a priori* demonstration of God’s mysterious existence, Cleanthes represents the theist who believes in the argument from design, while Philo, the sceptic, tackles the other two characters’ views by challenging Demea’s optimism and making Philo’s anthropomorphism seem hypocritical (cf. Ayer 274). More precisely, Philo agrees with Cleanthes that the argument from design is the only one worth considering and shows that it is a feeble argument because God is a product of anthropomorphism:

And is it possible, Cleanthes, said Philo, that after all these reflections, and infinitely more, which might be suggested, you can still persevere in your anthropomorphism, and assert the moral attributes of the deity, his justice, benevolence, mercy, and rectitude, to be of the same nature with these virtues in human creatures? (Hume, *Dialogues* 108)

Demea is offended by his view on things, and leaves the two characters at the end of the penultimate chapter. Cleanthes tells Demea “if we abandon all human analogy, as seems your intention, Demea, I am afraid we abandon all religion and retain no conception of the great object of our adoration” (Hume, *Dialogues* 113). But the debate between Cleanthes and Philo is also tense. In one of their exchanges, Cleanthes tells Philo and warns of the possible collapse of religious dialogue in general:

If you can make out the present point, and prove mankind to be unhappy or corrupted, there is an end at once of all religion. For to what purpose establish the natural attributes of the deity, while the moral are still doubtful and uncertain? (Hume, *Dialogues* 109)

In the context of such fiery exchanges, Cleanthes’s remark concerning the utility of religion seems out of place: “Religion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all. The doctrine of a future state is so strong and necessary a security to morals, that we never ought to abandon or neglect it” (Hume, *Dialogues* 131).

In conclusion, natural theology is a hostile ground, a dead end in Coleridge’s philosophy of religion. One explanation for this fact is that, for Coleridge, as for Kant, there are “two worlds”, as critic Douglas Hedley thinks (Hedley, *Coleridge* 162): “the imperfect human understanding” and “the All-perfect and Supreme Reason” (Coleridge, *Aids* 94). In this sense, the following passage may aid one in understanding Coleridge’s attempt to recover the respectability of the Platonic otherworldliness:

Where the evidence of the senses fails us, and beyond the precincts of sensible experience, there is no reality attributable to any notion, but what is given to it by Revelation, or the Law of Conscience, or the necessary interests of Morality (Coleridge, *Aids* 109).

In making his case for spiritual religion, Coleridge adopts a tripartite taxonomy comprising the prudential, the moral and the spiritual, each corresponding to a certain faculty: “The prudential corresponds to the sense and understanding; the moral to the heart and conscience; the spiritual to the will and the reason” (ibidem 21). As one can notice from the quote above, both the Will and Reason make up the Spiritual side of man. The Will is “the spiritual constituent of our Being” (40), acting in a world where unity reigns (41). Coleridge’s assumption is ultimately that because the Spirit is supernatural, our Will is lent some sort of supernatural Agency. Furthermore, the norms of morality, as in Kant’s philosophy, are God given, and one should bear in mind that Moses

receives the Ten Commandments from God. An erroneous use of the faculties, to Coleridge's mind, would be synonymous to a slippage into either fanaticism or atheism.

As stated repeatedly, Coleridge rejects a merely natural theology. In this sense, his own comment to Aphorism VI testifies for the poverty of natural theology by conflating it with morality. Referring to Paley's philosophy (and we should mainly have in mind *Natural Theology*), Douglas Hedley remarks that it is "overtly 'otherworldly' but unspiritual" (Hedley, *Coleridge* 170). This is perhaps the closest to Coleridge's characterization of Paley's philosophical naturalism. Coleridge always returns to the active role the religious agent should play in understanding "truths supersensual": "the mysteries of religion, and truths supersensual, are either cut and squared for the comprehension of the understanding, "the faculty judging according to sense", or desperately torn asunder from the reason, nay, fanatically opposed to it" (Coleridge, *Aids* 199).

Instead of looking for evidences of Christianity in Nature, Coleridge plunges deeper and looks for spiritual evidences where human will and reason call for divine Will and Reason. To recall Coleridge's beautiful passage, "Where the evidence of the senses fails us, and beyond the precincts of sensible experience, there is no reality attributable to any notion, but what is given to it by Revelation" (Coleridge, *Aids* 109). Unlike Hume, who blames our limited intellectual faculties for our impossibility of being religious, Coleridge encourages the readers of *Aids to Reflection* to make a leap of faith by surmounting the imperfect human understanding and call out to God. The memory of Hume and Paley's natural theology appears distorted in Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* and this is mainly to the latter's rejection of the empiricist epistemology that is to a large extent similar in the works by Hume and Paley studied in the present paper.

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