# COLERIDGE, PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

*Aids to Reflection* and the Mirror of the Spirit

DOUGLAS HEDLEY

*University of Cambridge*

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# Contents

# *The true philosopher is the lover of God: Coleridge's spiritual philosophy of religion*[1]

God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM' (Exodus 3: 14)

The Trinity means the divine mystery: the content is mystical, i.e. speculative. (Hegel)[2]

It is the doctrine of the tri-unity that connects Xty with Philosophy . . .
(Coleridge, *Notebooks* iv. 4860)

Coleridge repeatedly asserts that the essential ideas that interested him in Schelling were known to him through the English Platonic tradition. This claim has led scholars to scrutinise Coleridge's contact with Neoplatonic philosophy before his visit to Germany in 1798–99. Generally scholars have concluded that Coleridge is lying or they are forced to claim a depth of study and insight that is barely supported by the evidence of his notebooks and letters. Wellek argued that Coleridge has no sense of the incompatibility of his seventeenth-century English sources and German Idealism:

a storey from Kant, there a part of a room from Schelling, there a roof from Anglican theology and so on. The architect did not feel the clash of styles, the subtle and irreconcilable differences between the Kantian first floor and the Anglican roof. Coleridge's 'untenable architectonic', and his inability 'to construct a philosophy of his own . . . drove him into a fatal dualism of a philosophy of faith, which amounted to an intellectual justification of this bankruptcy of thought.[3]

Norman Fruman attacks the claim that Coleridge felt a genial affinity with Schelling by remarking that the 'specific influence from

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[1] Augustine, *City of God*, translated by H. Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), §8, 10: '*verus philosophus est amator Dei*'; cf. *Aids*, p. 41.

[2] 'Die Dreieinigkeit heißt das Mysterium Gottes; der Inhalt ist mystisch, d.h. spekulative.' *Vorlesung über die Philosophie der Religion* iii., edited by G. Lasson (Hamburg: Meiner, 1966), p. 69. cf. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by P. C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), vol. iii. pp. 280–3.

[3] R. Wellek, Immannel *Kant in England 1793–1838* (Princeton University Press, 1931) pp. 67–9.

antiquity or the Neoplatonists consists of scraps and tatters'.[4] Our counter thesis is that Wellek and Frumann are mistaken. Coleridge's claim is ingenuous and his achievement ingenious. The post-Kantians revived the doctrine of the Trinity in a philosophical manner. The sources of this revival rest ultimately in Neoplatonism and especially via the Cambridge and Florentine forms of Christian Neoplatonism. If we take seriously Coleridge's early and entirely earnest involvement in Unitarianism and his particular admiration for Priestley, together with his early interest in Ralph Cudworth, we may construe Coleridge's remarks about his sense of déjà vu in German metaphysics quite intelligibly without recourse to the view that Coleridge is dissimulating. He is, of course, notoriously inaccurate about a number of issues concerning his biography.[5] Nonetheless, it is possible to reconstruct his meaning without being either unduly sceptical or fanciful.

Coleridge's assertion in the *Biographia Literaria* that he was Trinitarian 'ad normam Platonis' before he became a Trinitarian in religion is enigmatic. It is hard to explain why Coleridge himself should come to see his own biography as the move from a Platonic Trinity to the Christian Trinity. This is mysterious because even the most allegorical interpreter of Plato's *Timaeus* or *Parmenides* is hard pressed to find direct analogies. Even if one takes the 'ad normam Platonis' to be a reference to the three hypostases of Neoplatonism, the tag remains opaque. The Neoplatonic triad of τὸ ἕν--ὁ νοῦς--ἡ ψυχή is not, in the manner of the Christian Trinity, consubstantial, and there has been no explanation of what Coleridge meant by his move from being a *philosophical* Trinitarian to being a *religious* Trinitarian. Some scholars have evaded the issue entirely: most notably McFarland who claims: 'The Trinity . . . [is] suspended in its mystery both One and Many.'[6]

Significantly, we have an important clue as to Coleridge's meaning. He claims that, as in Augustine's case, the 'libri … Platonicorum' helped him towards his reconversion to Trinitarian Christianity. In an age when philosophy has become self-consciously secular, it is hard to appreciate the theological parameters of much

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[4] N. Frumann, *Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), p. 174.
[5] cf. E. K. Chambers, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: a Biographical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1938), p. 1.
[6] T. McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), p. 229.

philosophical work in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
Cudworth's discussion of 'Platonism' was saturated by theological
tenets and debates. The attack on the Church dogmas of the Trinity
and the immortality of the soul by the Socinians/Antitrinitarians
motivated the uncovering of the Platonic corruptions of Christianity.
Coleridge believed he was able to extricate himself from bad
theology (Unitarianism) after extricating himself from bad phil-
osophy (necessitarianism). Indeed, he is quite explicit that – as in the
case of Augustine – it was Platonic thought which helped him
reconvert to the 'whole truth in Christ':

Nevertheless, I cannot doubt, that the difference of my metaphysical
notions from those of the Unitarians in general contributed to my final re-
conversion to the whole truth in Christ; even as according to his own
confession the books of certain Platonic philosophers (libri quorundam
Platonicorum) commenced the rescue of St Augustine's faith from the same
error aggravated by the far darker accompaniment of the Manichaean
heresy. (*BL* i. 205)

We might compare this with Gibbon's irony: the doctrine of the
Logos was taught in the school of Alexandria in 200 BC and then
*revealed* by the Apostle St John in AD 97![7] Yet Coleridge is being
utterly serious. Coleridge himself was for a time a Unitarian but
came to believe that the doctrine of the Trinity is at the very heart of
Christian belief and that the defence of the dogma demanded an
explication of the doctrine of the Logos rather akin to that under-
taken by the Alexandrine Fathers: he believed that Christian theol-
ogy worthy of the name cannot be divorced from idealistic thought.
He felt an attraction to Unitarianism as a young man and a revulsion
towards the 'toad of priesthood', and it was through German
Trinitarian metaphysics that he came to develop his own specific
vision of a Christian philosophy.

   Coleridge claims that his Trinitarianism has its sources in Scrip-
ture, in Bishop Bull, and the 'best parts' of Plotinus (*Lit. Rem.* iv. 307)
and he was not alone in linking the concept of spirit or intellect to
the Trinity. George Berkeley, perhaps one of the greatest British
philosophers, was concerned to insist that 'how unphilosophical
soever that doctrine may seem to many of the present age, yet it is
certain, the men of greatest fame and learning among the ancient

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[7] In the table of contents to E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3
   vols, edited by David Womersley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), vol. i. pp. 23, 776.

philosophers held a Trinity in the Godhead' (*Siris*, §364).[8] Berkeley consciously drew upon 'Doctor Cudworth' and the locus classicus of Christian Platonic Trinitarian speculation: Augustine's claim in the *Confessions* vi §9 that the doctrine of the Logos in John's Gospel 'was also found in the writings of philosophers, who taught that God had an only begotten Son by whom are all things' (*Siris*, §359). Coleridge's Platonism is primarily an exercise in philosophical theology.

## A SPIRITUAL PHILOSOPHY

The most important concept in *Aids to Reflection* is 'spirit', and the employment of this term is not the bland expression of Romantic religious piety, but blatantly metaphysical; Coleridge asserts that those materialists who judge spiritual things with the mind of the flesh are like those who would try to judge Titian or Raphael by 'Canons of Criticism deduced from the Sense of Smell' (*Aids*, p. 270). He asks: 'how is it possible that a work not *physical*, that is, employed on Objects known or believed on the evidence of the senses, should be other than *meta*physical, that is, treating on Subjects, the evidence of which is not derived from the Senses, is a problem which Critics of this order find it convenient to leave unsolved' (*Aids*, p. 81). This emphatic appeal to metaphysics is a clear rejection of John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* where 'metaphysics' is used disparagingly, and dismissed from the definition of philosophy, which is reduced to natural philosophy, ethics, and logic. Kant, by way of contrast, is fond of the term and uses it often in *titles* of his works: *Metaphysics of Morals* or *Prolegomena to any future Metaphysics* are examples. The use of the word 'metaphysics' immediately signals an anti-Lockean and Germanic-Kantian temper in Coleridge's thought.

A number of those philosophers and theologians who loom large in Coleridge's early thought, such as Hartley (1705–57), Priestley (1733–1804), and William Paley (1743–1805) were largely influenced

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[8] Beierwaltes, *Denken des Einen* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1985) pp. 368–84 and esp. p. 379: 'Nicht minder wichtig als geschichtliche und sachliche Vorgabe und als ständiger authoritativer Bezugspunkt für den Platonismus von Chartres, aber auch für Cusanus ist *Boethius*: a) sein Gedanke der gegenseitige Bedingung von Eins-Sein und Sein . . . b) sein strenges Festhalten an der Nicht-Zahlhaftigkeit der Trinität und von daher sein Vorgriff auf "Wiederholung" der Einheit in ihrer eigenen oder als ihre eigene Gleicheit.' The roots of the association of 'being-one' and 'being' are to be found in Plato's *Parmenides*.

by John Locke (1632–1704). Coleridge believed that the basic tenets of Lockean empiricism had been refuted by the German philosophers, Kant and the Idealists, and that with German tools he could renew something of the vigour of 'spiritual platonic old England' (*Aids*, p. 182).

Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was an attempt to apply the fruits of experimental philosophy (natural science) to philosophy itself. This leads to a combination of scepticism and realism in Locke; he is sceptical about the mode of philosophical reason in the scholastic tradition, such as the concept of substance, and employs central ideas in his philosophy that are derived from empirical science. The best example of this reverence for science is the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.[9] This was certainly not a reductionist programme; Locke's fairly conservative views on ethics and religion rule this out. Yet Locke's method suggested the rigorous explication of human knowledge in terms of experimental science. Hume, notoriously, saw the novelty of Locke's philosophical position in this way. Yet much less radical philosophers than Hume such as Hartley and Priestley saw Locke's thought as suggestive of the new empiricist science of man, as did the innovative apologist for religion Berkeley. After all, Locke was a friend of Robert Boyle, and came to be closely associated with Newton in the eighteenth-century imagination, and it was in Cambridge that Locke's thought exerted particular influence.[10] It was natural for writers such as Hume or the French intellectuals to see Locke as advancing with cautious steps towards a vision of human mental life in terms of experimental science.[11]

Whatever the precise upshot of Locke's own philosophy, the thrust of his reasoning was seen by many philosophers in the eighteenth century in terms of the attempt to explain human knowledge as a part of nature. The logical result of Locke's philosophy seemed to be 'naturalism': the thesis that human knowledge and activity can be explained as a scientifically intelligible part of an entirely natural process. Coleridge's counter-thesis is that *as* a spiritual being man cannot be explained in terms of 'nature'.

[9] cf. J. Yolton, *A Locke Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 198–201; J. Mackie, *Problems from Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), pp. 7–23.
[10] J. A. Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).
[11] J. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

Coleridge in *Aids to Reflection* is proposing an Idealistic philosophy. The term 'idealistic' is, of course, very broad and possibly misleading. Let us define it as the theory that *ultimate* reality does not consist of material objects but of consciousness or personality. It is not a *res* or thing but mind or spirit that constitutes his fundamental ontology. As W. R. Inge wrote: 'Idealism is most satisfactorily defined as the interpretation of the world according to a scale or value, or in Plato's phrase, by the idea of the Good.'[12] As such Coleridge's philosophy is opposed to a philosophical naturalism which explains reality by investigating the physical, that is 'natural', origins of objects, events, or persons. Hence Coleridge's metaphysics attempts to explain the 'lower' (nature) in terms of that which is higher (spirit) whereas the naturalist explains the higher in terms of the lower, the spiritual realm in purely natural terms. Berkeley in *Siris*, §263 writes:

Proclus, in his *Commentary on the Theology of Plato* observes there are two sorts of philosophers. The one placed Body first in the order of beings, and made the faculty of thinking depend thereupon, supposing that the principles of all things are corporeal; that Body most really or principally exists, and that all other things in a secondary sense, and by virtue of that. Others, making all corporeal things to be dependent upon Soul or Mind, think this to exist in the first place and primary sense, and the being of bodies to be altogether derived from and presuppose that of the Mind.

Coleridge belongs to an Idealistic tradition in Berkeley's sense of 'those who make all corporeal things to be dependent upon Soul or Mind', i.e. in the broad meaning of anti-naturalistic. He belongs, in an important sense, to the tradition that includes Plato, Plotinus, Aquinas, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hegel. Many theists are idealists in that they claim the dependency or derivation of the material realm upon or from the spiritual.[13] This is a view of idealism that has been contested, notably by Miles Burnyeat, but it does explain in part why Berkeley, Coleridge, Hegel and Schelling could see themselves as idealists within a Platonic tradition.[14]

We will not use the term 'Idealism' in this rather broad sense; however, it *is* a corrective to the misapprehension that idealism is the

[12] W. R. Inge, *Outspoken Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1919), p. 270.
[13] A. E.Taylor, 'Theism' in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 13 vols., edited by James Hastings (Edinburgh, 1921– ), vol. xii, pp. 261–87.
[14] M. Burnyeat, 'Idealism and Greek philosophy: what Descartes saw and Berkeley missed' in *Idealism Past and Present*, edited by G. Vasey (Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 19–50.

thesis that the world only exists in the human mind or is the product of human categories of thought. Although idealists use arguments to attack materialism, the major idealists tend to reject subjectivism or anti-realism. The best example is Hegel, who is quite adamant that the *Idee* is not subjective, a product of the finite mind, but is real per se and the presupposition of all finite subjective mental experience.[15]

Coleridge defines the spiritual as being not physical, and not passive. Mind cannot be identified with physical objects since the realm of objects presupposes some knower. The natural realm considered by itself is a realm of the chain of cause and effect: 'The moment we assume an Origin in Nature, a true *Beginning*, an actual First – that moment we rise *above* Nature, and are compelled to assume a *supernatural* Power' (*Aids*, p. 270). Characteristically Teutonic in Coleridge's Idealism is the distinction between 'nature' and 'spirit' that excludes the human spirit from the domain of nature. Whereas a Thomist would see human minds as created parts of nature, Coleridge exempts the human spirit, mind and will from what he defines as 'nature'; that is, in Kantian terms, 'the sum of all appearances'.[16] Transcendental idealism is precisely the theory that the understanding is the source of the laws of nature.

The second 'Teutonic' aspect is the link between knowledge as spontaneous and the fact of freedom. If knowledge is 'synthetic' in the Kantian sense, then a deterministic, reductionist philosophy of the sort commonly associated with the radical French Enlightenment, and to a lesser extent with Hume, cannot be true. If knowledge presupposes the a priori activity of the mind, knowledge cannot itself be explained as shaped from without, by 'natural' or 'mechanical forces'. All the Idealists, and Coleridge followed them on this point, held that Kant had produced the results of philosophy.[17]

These roughly correspond with the three critiques:

1. The principle of *subjectivity* qua spontaneity is the key to phil-

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[15] G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaft* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1975), §213–44, pp. 182–97.

[16] cf A. Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Glasgow: Dacare, 1948), pp. 2ff.; Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B163.

[17] See Schelling's letter to Hegel: 'Die Philosophie ist noch nicht am Ende. Kant hat die Resultate gegeben: die Prämissen fehlen noch.' *Materialien zu Schellings Philosophischen Anfängen*, edited by M. Frank (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 119.

osophy. If the mind is synthetic, and not merely reading off information from the world, determinism cannot be correct. A true philosophy must be a philosophy of freedom.

2. Freedom is the *ratio essendi* of morality. Morality is not the acceptance of alien codes and precepts, but is derived from the proper exercise of autonomous reason.

3. A teleological view of nature – not a mechanism but, rather as Schelling phrased it, 'slumbering spirit'.

These three principles were the basis of the idealistic interpretation of Kant, and the basis of their attempt to produce a systematic rational philosophy of the *super*natural in the strict but not superstitious sense. This project meant a radical critique of salient points in Kant's philosophy. It also meant the attempt to produce a monistic system that would overcome the dualisms of Kant's thought. The attempt to produce a unified system – inspired by Jacobi's critique – led to the renewal of almost precisely the kind of philosophising which Kant wished to abrogate.

The major issue was how the spiritual can be seen to relate to the material realm, mental to the non-mental, freedom to the laws of physics. Kant started from the description of the physical realm in natural science and then sought to find a place for the spiritual by means of his transcendental idealism. If the physical realm is transcendentally ideal, i.e. the product of the synthetic activity of the human understanding, Newton's physics is not a description of reality per se. Human freedom can be located 'beyond', as it were, the realm of appearances. Kant's concept of freedom was rooted in a dualism that the Idealists could not accept. This dualism seemed to be rooted in a compromise between the 'scientific' and 'spiritual' image of reality. Freedom in the Kantian system seemed to be an escape from the necessity of nature.

The central concern was to combine the spiritual principle of Kant's philosophy with a monistic system of thought on the model of Spinoza. All the Idealists were convinced that Kant had revolutionised philosophy through his establishment of a spiritual principle of freedom as the centre of philosophy; but they were equally determined that the dualisms of his system should be avoided. The Idealists rejected the resolute determinism and naturalism of Spinoza's system but the principle of a monistic system was accepted as the goal of a new philosophy. The idea of combining the insights of Kant and Spinoza was largely the result of the Idealist response to

the philosophy of F. H. Jacobi.[18] Jacobi held the position that the 'fact' of freedom could not, without absurdity, be integrated into a philosophical system. Freedom, for Jacobi, is precisely that which is inexplicable for human reflection, and the attempt to explain the inexplicable leads to determinism and nihilism.[19] All the Idealists were convinced that Jacobi was wrong and that his challenge deserved serious attention and a decisive refutation.[20]

Jacobi's central thesis is that speculative thought cannot capture the 'fact' of the human experience, that which can only be accounted for by recourse to a personal extra-mundane God. Jacobi considers Spinoza to be supremely important because he reveals the pantheistic scheme in its true nature. The value of the rigour and clarity of Spinoza's pantheism is precisely its stark revelation of the impossibility of the compromise between

1. faith in God and the belief in the fact (*Tatsache*) of *freedom* and
2. a philosophical *system* that attempts to deduce reality from an immanent ground.

This alternative between Spinozism and freedom presented by Jacobi was profoundly influential. One could say that the impetus of German Idealism was to develop a Spinozism *of freedom*.[21] Coleridge did not agree with Jacobi's presentation of an *alternative* between

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[18] An excellent account of the period between Kant and Fichte is F. C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

[19] Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Werke* (Leipzig: Fleischer 1812–25), vol. iii. p. 70. cf. K. Hammacher, *Die Philosophie Friedrich Heinrich Jacobis* (Munich: Fink, 1969) and S. Peetz, *Die Freiheit im Wissen. Eine Untersuchung zu Schellings Koncept der Rationalität* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1995), pp. 18–76.

[20] Rolf-Peter Horstmann, *Die Grenzen der Vernunft. Eine Untersuchung zu Zielen und Motiven des Deutschen Idealismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Anton Hain, 1991), pp. 49–100.

[21] Spinoza's attempt to base freedom upon necessity was influential for the idealist attempt to base necessity upon freedom, evident in both Schelling's earlier thought and Hegel's dialectic. Although the influence of Spinoza upon Coleridge has been perhaps somewhat overemphasised by critics like McFarland, it is plausible to see Coleridge being attracted to several elements in Spinoza. The first part of the *Ethics* concerns the infinite and eternal divine substance. The conception of this unitary substance and its *modi* bears a very strong resemblance to Plotinus' philosophy of the One: it is certainly neither Cartesian nor Aristotelian. The conception of eternity and the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* is Neoplatonic, as is the distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio*, the intellectual love of God, and the contrast between the bondage of the passions and the freedom of the intellect. cf. P. O. Kristeller, 'Stoic and neoplatonic sources of Spinoza's ethics', in *History of European Ideas* 5 (1985), pp. 1–15. See above, pp. 83–5.

either reflection or faith. Coleridge's lack of sympathy for Jacobi's alternative is evident from Coleridge's Jacobi marginalia:

Lessing insisted that he 'required everything to be natural'; and I (maintained) that there could be no natural philosophy of the supernatural and nevertheless both (natural and supernatural) evidently existed. (*Marg.* iii. 81)[22]

Coleridge writes opposite that 'there can be no natural', 'dass es keine natürliche'

This is a mere play on words, little better than a pun. By natürlich Lessing means vernunftmässig. Substitute this, viz *rationally*: and what becomes of Jacobi's repartee? That there can be no *rational* philosophy of the Supernatural ? (Ibid.)

The fact that Coleridge regards Jacobi's repartee as a pun reveals how little he shares Jacobi's basic position. On the contrary, philosophy is, according to Coleridge, the *rational* explication of the *super-natural*. Coleridge shares with the Idealists the deep impress of Jacobi's thought and the rejection of the 'philosophy of faith'. The parameters of Coleridge's thought are set by the Idealists, not by Jacobi. Nevertheless Coleridge was never the adherent of any one German Idealist. He comes closest to becoming an adherent of the most Platonic – Schelling. Yet even in this case Coleridge was never a slavish disciple, and becomes quite a powerful critic.

Coleridge's interest in Fichte seems entirely influenced by Schelling, who – though regarded as a pupil of Fichte – was from the earliest phases of his philosophy rather independent. Schelling's move was to reverse Fichte's 'The Subject is the Absolute' to 'The Absolute is Subject.' This move dispensed with subjective idealism and was the path to a revival of natural theology in German Idealism: the absolute is prior to the act of knowing.[23] Fichte wished to show that spirit is the key to nature, and freedom is the key to necessity. Notwithstanding Fichte's adamant insistence to the contrary, the constitution or 'positing' of the world or the 'not I' by the 'I' remained highly mysterious, and consequently his radical monism seemed no more attractive than the dualism of Kant. Furthermore,

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[22] 'Lessing blieb dabey: dasz er sich alles ''natürlich ausgebeten haben wollte''; und ich: dasz es keine natürliche Philosophie des Uebernatürlichen geben könnte, und doch beides (Natürliches und Uebernatürliches) offenbar vorhanden wäre.'

[23] Even though Fichte violently attacked Schelling and Hegel for abandoning transcendental philosophy and reverting to metaphysics, Fichte himself, post-1801, places the absolute above the ego.

the tenor of Fichte's 'Science of Knowledge' or *Wissenschaftslehre* seemed to reduce nature to the condition of the moral development of humanity. If Kant's theory of freedom seemed like an escape from the chains of nature, Fichte's theory of freedom seemed to be based upon a curious denigration of nature: Coleridge takes over Schelling's mixture of admiration for, and impatience with, Fichte's thought (*BL* i. 158).

Coleridge was much more attracted to Schelling's philosophy. The latter's *Naturphilosophie* was dictated in part by a dissatisfaction with Fichte's Idealism. In the *Freiheitschrift* Schelling expounds the difference between Fichte and himself quite succinctly as follows: 'not solely that subjectivity is all but that, the other way around, everything is subjectivity' ('nicht allein die Ichheit alles, sondern auch umgekehrt alles Ichheit sei').[24] Schelling wished to integrate unconscious, natural processes with the activity of spirit: and to produce an *Ideal-Realismus*. In this, however, Schelling's philosophy barely remained an idealism at all. By insisting upon the polarity of nature and spirit as equal manifestations of the absolute, Schelling was denying the primacy of spirit that is characteristic for idealism (and Platonism). Despite the great shift in his thought in the *Freiheitschrift*, Schelling retains his concern to develop a *natural* or *physical* basis for freedom, a concern that links this middle period to the early *Naturphilosophie*. Coleridge criticises adamantly this aspect of Schelling, and his criticism has been well documented in scholarship:[25] nevertheless, whereas Fichte plays a very minor role for Coleridge, Schelling is a vitally important presence. Yet in a sense Coleridge's own drive to produce a natural theology can be seen in Schelling's attempt to adumbrate a philosophy that proceeds from the absolute rather than from the strictly transcendental/Kantian standpoint of knowledge: Fichte's *Ich*. This fact has led many Fichte scholars, notably Reinhart Lauth, to insist that Schelling never really appreciated Fichte's position properly.[26]

Coleridge does not seem to have found Hegel very congenial. His perfunctory *Marginalia* on Hegel's *Logik* suggest that Coleridge did

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[24] F. W. J. von Schelling, *Über das Wesen der Menschlichen Freiheit*, edited by H. Fruhmans (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983), p. 350.

[25] The best account is F. A. Uehlein, *Die Manifestation des Selbstsbewußtseins im konkreten 'Ich bin'* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1982), pp. 108 ff.

[26] R. Lauth, *Die Entstehung von Schellings Identitätsphilosophie in der Auseinandersetzung mit Fichtes Wissenscaftslehre* (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1975).

not consider Hegel as a serious alternative to Kant or Schelling. Although Coleridge considered the primacy of the spirit to have been firmly established by Kant, the *nature* of this realm and *its relation to physical phenomena* was very much open for discussion. Kant's dualism, Fichte's subjectivism, and the protean nature of Schelling's thought did not seem to offer a satisfactory spiritual philosophy, and Hegel's philosophy was not really considered in earnest. Thus Coleridge had more scope for his own philosophical work than is sometimes conceded by critics such as Wellek or Orsini.

### THE REVIVAL OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

The phrase 'natural theology' strikes modern English readers as redolent of Paley, the 'Bridgewater Treatises', and the notoriously arid apologetic theology of Hanoverian England. Yet, this apart, it is an accurate term for Coleridge's thought that explains the link between the Cambridge Platonists and Hegel and Schelling, and, moreover, why Coleridge felt that his own dynamic philosophy was the 'system of Pythagoras and Plato revived' (*BL* i. 263): natural theology. The word 'system' is important. It is a favourite term of Cudworth, the 'real founder of British Idealism'.[27] Cudworth's 'system', moreover, is a defence of freedom against philosophical fatalism in which he invokes Pythagoras and Plato against Hobbes as the modern sophist.

The challenge presented by Jacobi led to a revival of natural theology: his objection, as a philosopher of *Empfindsamkeit*, to all kinds of system-building in philosophy as nihilistic, threw down the gauntlet to the neo-Kantians, and fired the Idealists' attempt to produce a true intellectual system that was grounded in freedom and a chain of reflections that culminate in the Platonic Trinity. Hegel and Schelling are perhaps the last great phase of the Platonic succession; not in the sense of being avowed disciples of Plato the thinker, but rather as proponents of the natural theology forged by Plato and especially the Neoplatonists.

The term 'natural theology' was employed by Cicero's contemporary the great antiquarian M. Terentius Varro to define the attempt to give an account of the divine that claims truth. The original

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[27] John H. Muirhead, *The Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1931), p. 27.

distinction is not between natural and revealed but mythical and civil theology on the one hand, and natural on the other. Mythical theology consists of the stories of the gods and since the Periclean enlightenment the educated regarded these as the fantasy of the poets. Civil theology is the knowledge of the religious rituals of the state calendar. Again these matters were thought by enlightened Athenian intellectuals to be the product of (human) νόμος and not φύσις. Natural theology is a doctrine of God that belongs to a rational and comprehensive theory of φύσις or *natura*.[28] Unlike civil and mythical theology it claims to be ἐπιστήμη; or what the Germans call *Wissenschaft*. The Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth provides a clear account of such a natural theology. He claims that true religion has *three* elements:

First, that all things in the world do not float without a head and governor; but there is a God, an omnipotent understanding Being, presiding over all. Secondly, that this God being essentially good and just, there is φύσει καλὸν καὶ δίκαιον, something in its own nature immutably and eternally just and unjust; and not by arbitrary will, law and command. And lastly, that there is something ἐφ᾽ ἡμῖν, or, that we are so far forth principles or masters of our own actions, as to be accountable to justice for them, or to make us guilty and blame-worthy for what we do amiss, and to deserve punishment accordingly.[29]

The real founder of natural theology as three things '(which are the most Important Things, that the Mind of man can employ it self upon) [and which] taken all together, make up the Wholeness and Entireness of that which is here called by us, The True Intellectual System of the Universe', is Plato.[30] He established the principles of God, providence, and judgement as the cardinal tenets of a philosophic theology. In the tenth book of the *Laws* he asserts that:

1. God is a good and wise spirit, and the source and designer of the realm of becoming, i.e. nature.
2. God controls nature according to his goodness.
3. God judges man according to his justice.

This, through the influence of Neoplatonism (in particular Proclus),

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[28] cf. the *Periphyseon* of John Scot Eriugena, Coleridge's favourite, translated by I. P. Sheldon-Williams (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976–   ), known as *De Divisione Naturae*.

[29] Cudworth, The *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, 3 vols., edited by Harrison (London: Tegg, 1845), p. xxxiv.

[30] Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, p. xxxiv.

is constitutive for St Thomas' thought.[31] The *Summa contra Gentiles* presents a vision of an exhaustive system of reality from God

1.  in himself
2.  in his procession in his creatures
3.  in the return of the creatures to their Divine source.

The first book is devoted to the existence and attributes of God, the second book to the providential divine relationship with his creatures, and the third to God's ultimate relation to his creatures as their good: as their gracious judge. St Thomas constructs a broadly Neoplatonic edifice.[32] Schelling's *Freiheitschrift* has just the same *exitus–reditus* structure.

Cudworth's 'Philosophy of Religion' is an account of the true system because it is opposed to atheism; 'intellectual' to distinguish it from the 'other, Vulgarly so called, Systems of the World' :

Cogitation is, in order of nature, before local motion. Life and understanding, soul and mind, are no syllables or complexions of things, secondary and derivative, which might therefore be made out of things devoid of life and understanding; but simple, primitive, and uncompounded natures; there are no qualities or accidental modifications of matter, but substantial things . . . A perfect understanding Being is the beginning and head of the scale of entity; from whence things gradually descend downward, lower and lower, till they end in senseless matter.[33]

Cudworth's System is intellectual in the sense of being idealistic: 'cogitation' is before 'motion'.

In the mature *Religionsphilosophie* of both Hegel and Schelling we find an explicit avowal of natural theology; not in the sense of the Enlightenment 'evidences' of a designer but in the ancient, Cudworthian sense of a reasoned explication of the relation of God to world. Hegel opened his lectures on the philosophy of religion with the words: 'The object of these lectures is the philosophy of religion, which in general has the same purpose as the earlier type of metaphysical science, which was called *theologia naturalis*.'[34] Furthermore, this natural theology is explicitly a *Geistesmetaphysik* or meta-

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[31]  W. Hankey, *God in Himself* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), p. 8.
[32]  A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist* (London: Macmillan, 1930), vol. i. pp. 1–14 and C. C. J. Webb, *Studies in the History of Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1915), pp. 1–83.
[33]  Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, vol. iii. pp. 434–5.
[34]  G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by P. C. Hodgson, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), vol. i. p. 83.

physics of the spirit or mind: the philosophy of religion of the German Idealists is a phenomenology of self-consciousness.

Paul Tillich has distinguished between the 'ontological' and the 'cosmological' approaches in natural theology. The first, the Platonist and idealist method, approaches the divine through immediate consciousness or awareness of the transcendent ontological ground. The second, the Aristotelian or Thomistic path, tends to use evidence of the cosmos as the basis for an inference to a Divine architect.[35] Augustine's books IX and X of *De Trinitate* serve as an example of the first kind that considers God through the spirit, and the 'Five Ways' of Aquinas, which considers God through the world, as an example of the second path. The Idealists follow the first 'interior' path. The absolute, or God, is not to be inferred from the facts or the very contingency of the cosmos, but is intuited or apprehended in consciousness or the structure of the spirit. The distinction between the spiritual and material is such that the transcendence of the divine is not conceived in materialistic terms as remoteness. The refusal to envisage divine transcendence as 'out and up there' and the absolute as the apex of a cosmic pyramid has sometimes been mistakenly interpreted as pantheism; when in fact it is the opposite. The enigmatic image of God as a circle whose centre is everywhere and circumference is nowhere is the attempt to dispel materialistic conceptions.

Tillich notes: 'Obviously German idealism belongs to the ontological type of philosophy of religion.'[36] We find in Hegel's *Philosophy of Religion* and Schelling's writings the same use of the Neoplatonic *triadic* structure in order to explicate the ground of subject and object, an absolute *prius* that both thinkers identify with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The revival of natural theology in Germany was linked to the renewal of the *Trinitas Platonica*. Coleridge planned his own great speculative work, but he speaks of his intent to defend 'CHRISTIAN FAITH AS THE PERFECTION OF HUMAN INTELLIGENCE' (*Aids*, p. 6). This reflects Coleridge's interest in natural theology, not in opposition to revealed theology but as a speculative explication of the central doctrines of the Christian

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[35] Paul Tillich, 'Zwei Wege der Religionsphilosophie' in *Gesammelte Werke*, 14 vols., (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1959–74), vol. v (1964), pp. 122–37 and 'The two types of the philosophy of religion' in *The Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 12–29.
[36] Tillich, *Culture*, p. 21.

religion. Coleridge could not have known the full-blown natural theology of Schelling and Hegel, but only fragments and outlines – of which Schelling's *Philosophie und Theologie*, *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums*, *Bruno*, and the *Freiheitsschrift* were the most significant.

<center>PLATONISM</center>

In his *Marginalia* on Thomas Gray Coleridge writes of the 'little, according to *my* convictions at least, the very little of proper Platonism contained in the *written* books of Plato' (*Marg.* ii. 866). Until the eighteenth century 'Platonism' referred to Plato's dialogues, the commentaries of the Academy, the comments of certain Church Fathers, and often esoteric writings of vaguely Platonic provenance. The term 'Neoplatonism' arose precisely during the eighteenth century as this very catholic view of Platonism was in decline.[37] 'Platonism' in this context meant various metaphysical doctrines that had been distilled from the dialogues and made explicit within the tradition. The result was a tendency to allegorise certain passages.

Yet it was only really in the early nineteenth century with the great philological labours of Schleiermacher that a radically revised picture of Plato was developed. Influenced by the culture of sensibility, and the Romantic conception of the philosopher-artist-poet, Schleiermacher developed the idea that the literary form of Plato's writing was an essential part of the content of Plato's philosophy – his thought is not merely hinted at but contained in dialogues, and it is fruitless to try and discover a metaphysical 'system'. This was expressed most notably in Schleiermacher's *Introduction* to his translation of Plato in 1804.[38] Hegel and Schelling, however, remained within the limits of the older Neoplatonic vision of Platonism as a metaphysical system, of which Plato's dialogues form an introduction. Rüdiger Bubner notes: 'Despite the contemporaneous nature of both projects – Early Idealism and Early Romanticism, both expressed in the middle of the last decade of the 18th century,

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[37] E. N. Tigerstedt, *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato: an Outline and some Observations* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1974). Creuzer's translation of Plotinus' *Treatise* iii. 8 in 1805 marks a change towards a more positive reception of Neoplatonic thought in Germany.

[38] Printed in K. Gaiser, *Das Platon Bild* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1969), pp. 1–32.

they constituted wildly differing views of how to interpret Plato for their own age'.[39] Platonism remained, for both Schelling and Hegel, a model of systematic metaphysical speculation.

Coleridge claims in the *Biographia Literaria* of Schelling that 'I first found a genial coincidence with much that I had toiled out for myself, and a powerful assistance in what I had yet to do' (*BL* i. 160). This claim has been attacked, most notably by René Wellek, as mere subterfuge.[40] However, Schelling is much of a Platonist: Crabb Robinson speaks of him as the 'modern Plato' in 1802. Schelling wrote a commentary upon Plato's *Timaeus* as a boy at the Tübingen Stift and his Platonic dialogue *Bruno* of 1802 was, as Michael Vater remarks, 'Schelling's decision to turn back the history of philosophy and present himself as Plato risen from the grave'.[41] In this dialogue Schelling attacks Fichte in the guise of Giordano Bruno. Vater says of Schelling: 'Neoplatonism means for him above all *systematic* thought, speculation which reconciles, integrates, harmonizes and achieves a point of view transcending conflict and opposition. In this sense all systematic philosophy is ''Neoplatonism,'' the conceptual ascent to the vision of the eternal or the Absolute.'[42] At this period Schelling had barely any direct acquaintance with Plotinus. However, in 1804 Franz Berg, a professor of church history, launched into an attack on Schelling's philosophy in a dialogue in which the proponent of Schelling's thought is called 'Plotin'. In the following year Friedrich Schlegel attacked Schelling's thought as merely an expansion of Spinoza and Plotinus.[43] Coleridge's sense of affinity with Schelling's Platonism is perfectly intelligible.

If we consider Coleridge's notebooks and letters, we can see the strong influence of late seventeenth-century Platonists upon his early thought. Cudworth's 'counterfeit infinity' or the motto for the

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[39] 'Trotz der historischen Gleichzeitigkeit beider programme – des Frühidealismus wie der Füromantik, die beider nach der Mitte des letzten Jahrzehnts des 18. Jahrhunderts formuliert werden, handelt es sich doch um deutlich voneinander geschiedene Vorstellungen darüber, wie Platon aktuell zu lesen sie.' R. Bubner, 'Die Entdeckung Platons durch Schelling und seine Aneignung durch Schleiermacher' in *Innovationen des Idealismus*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1995), p. 33.
[40] Wellek, *Immanuel Kant in England*, pp. 78–9.
[41] Michael G. Vater, introduction in Schelling, *Bruno, or, On the Natural and the Divine Principle of Things* (Albany: State of New York Press, 1984), p. 73.
[42] Michael G. Vater 'Schelling's ''neoplatonic system-notion'' ' in B. Harris (ed.), *The Significance of Neoplatonism* (Norfolk, Va: Old Dominion University Press, 1976), pp. 277 ff.
[43] cf. W. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus und Idealismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1972), pp. 100 ff.

Ancient Mariner taken from Thomas Burnet are examples of the deep influence that the Christian Platonic metaphysical tradition exerted on Coleridge's mind before his acquaintance with German Idealism. The Cambridge Platonists play the central role not least because they were professional philosophers (unlike Hobbes and Locke) in eminent positions in the University of Cambridge: Whichcote was the Provost of King's, Cudworth was Master of Clare and Christ's. Their influence extended to major figures of the early eighteenth century such as Locke, Ray, or Shaftesbury. Furthermore, they were the first group of philosophers to develop the vernacular for philosophical writing: indeed, much of the terminology of modern English philosophy: 'consciousness', 'self-consciousness', 'philosophy of religion', 'theism', even 'Cartesianism', are coinages of the Platonists.[44]

Ralph Cudworth is the most important because his *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, a defence of metaphysical theism and the Christian Platonic Trinity, became a handbook of philosophical ideas: Cudworth's historiography provided the foundations for the German histories of philosophy of the eighteenth century. Traces of Cudworth's influence can be found quite clearly in the *Pantheismus-streit* between Jacobi and Lessing.[45] Albeit often indirect, Cudworth is a significant source for Schelling.

The importance of the Cambridge Platonists is quite overlooked if they are detached from the roots and ramifications of their Platonism. They are not an exotic growth that sprang up in Cambridge amid the turbulence of the Civil War that then withered and disappeared – leaving no mark on subsequent thought; a notion based on the erroneous assumption that British thought is unremitting empiricism. The Cambridge Platonists are rooted in the humanism that led to the discovery of the Platonic texts at the beginning of the fifteenth century.[46] Although 'Platonism' never displaced Aristotelianism and was never part of the philosophical curriculum in England, it did have powerful proponents: figures

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[44] U. Thiel, 'Cudworth and seventeenth-century theories of consciousness' in *The Uses of Antiquity*, edited by S. Gaukroger (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), pp. 70–99; N. Lash, *The Beginning and the End of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 14; P. Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[45] Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard [University Press], 1997) pp. 80–90; 204ff.

[46] I owe this point to Sarah Hutton. cf. W. R. Sorley, *A History of English Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1920), pp. 8–10.

such as Everard Digby (1550–90) at St John's in Cambridge and
Thomas Jackson (1579–1640) at Corpus Christi, Oxford. Such
'humanists' were deeply interested in theological problems, and had
evident roots in medieval traditions and practices:[47] we find not only
links with Florentine Platonism, but strong similarities to Nicholas of
Cusa, the German Mystics, John Scot Eriugena, and the Alexandrian
divines – the 'lofty' Platonist and mystical wing of Christian theology
rather than the more conceptual and empiricist Aristotelian-
scholastics. Such a 'Platonism' was philosophically syncretistic and
strongly theological: in particular the desire to produce a rational
theology with ancient pedigree, a *prisca theologia*, is best exemplified
by Cudworth's philosophical historiography in the *True Intellectual
System of the Universe* in which philosophy is presented as a perennial
battle between the theists-cum-idealists and atheists-cum-materialists.
The 'Platonism' of seventeenth-century Cambridge had a
distinctively Florentine form. It bore the imprint of Ficino's fusion of
Renaissance Neoplatonism and Christian theology.

### THE PLATONIC TRINITY

The doctrine of the Trinity is the most important doctrine of the
Christian church and despite the attempts of the Church Fathers to
define and expound the doctrine it is still the *quaestio vexata* of
Christian theology. How can God be one substance and three
persons? The Nicaean Council of 325 forged the non-biblical term
ὁμοούσιος ('of the same substance') to describe the identity of the
Father and the Son. At the Council of Constantinople (381) this
identity is extended to the Spirit.[48] At the beginning of the fifth
century Augustine and Boethius developed the doctrines of the
Councils. The root of the problem was the idea of an intelligible
world of ideas that served as an intermediary between the transcen-
dent God and the world. This idea of the Logos was taken by
Christians on the authority of the speculative theology of John and
Paul to refer to the pre-existent Christ. Prior to Nicaea and
Constantinople the exact relationship of this Logos to the divine

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[47] cf. John B. Gleason, *John Colet* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1989).
Gleason argues that John Colet's (1466/7–1519) influence in English Platonism seems to
have been greatly exaggerated by nineteenth-century historiography.
[48] Adolf Martin Ritter, 'Dogma und Lehre in der Alten Kirche' in *Handbuch der Dogmen und
Theologiegeschichte* i. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1982).

source remained a matter of debate. The doctrine of the coequal Trinity arose from asserting the unity of the Logos with its source.

The great Antitrinitarian N. Soverain in his anonymous, but momentous, text *Le Platonisme dévoilé, ou Essai touchant le Verbe Platonicien* in 1700 isolated the tendency to hypostasise the divine word or creative disposition as the core of the Platonic Trinity, and of course Plato's demiurge is a creator – in opposition to the entirely contemplative God of Aristotle's metaphysics.[49] Drawing on the Wisdom books of the Old Testament and in particular Philo's idea of the Logos, where the wisdom of God is not just an attribute but a kind of being which contains the divine ideas, as the intelligible plan of creation, the Church Fathers abandoned the notion that the Logos was inferior to its source. The relational unity of the Christian Godhead integrates the Platonic Forms: the divine ideas do not constitute an intermediate world between the primal divine unity and the world but *are* the self-expression of the Godhead: the ideas constitute the intellect of God, who is thus an absolute mind or subject. A. H. Armstrong notes:

> The created universe then appears as an 'extra', a magnificent and purely superfluous expression of pure disinterested generosity, in the image and for the glory of the eternal *Logos*: and not, as it was for the pagan Platonists, the descending stages of divine self expression.[50]

Cudworth saw providence in pagan thought:

> For that Plato and his followers held τρεῖς ἀρχικὰς ὑποστασεῖς, 'three hypostases in the Deity, that were the first principles of all things,' is a thing very well known to all; though we do not affirm, that these Platonic hypostases are exactly the same with those in the Christian trinity. Now Plato himself sufficiently intimates this not to have been his own invention; and Plotinus tells us, that it was παλαιὰ δόξα, 'an ancient opinion,' before Plato's time, which had been delivered down by some of the Pythagorics.[51]

There is a powerful precedent for Cudworth's views if we look at the classic statement of the Trinity in Augustine, for whom the Trinity is not primarily a biblical notion; nor, indeed, philosophically dubious. In fact the Trinity is one of his earliest obsessions and constitutes an important reason for conversion. Despite the subordinationism implicit in the descending levels of the self-unfolding of

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[49] cf. Franz, *Schellings Platon-Studien*, pp. 28 ff.
[50] A. H. Armstrong, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1960), p. 24.
[51] Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, vol. i. p. 41.