Book Review: Coleridge, Philosophy And Religion: Aids To Reflection And The Mirror Of The Spirit

Ken Casey
BOOK REVIEWS

Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion: Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit by **Douglas Hedley**

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Emerson, in his panegyric on Plato, notes that “every brisk young man who says in succession fine things to each reluctant generation . . . is some reader of Plato, translating into the vernacular, wittily, his good things.” He lists a series of eminent thinkers, Boethius, Rabelais, Erasmus, among others, and ends with Coleridge. Modern histories of Platonism tend to relegate Coleridge to a minor role, at best a minor commentator; however, if Douglas Hedley is correct, the view of Coleridge as a minor commentator and patchwork thinker is historically inaccurate and philosophically impoverishing. The book sets an ambitious project: philosophically it attempts to recover an overlooked rich tradition, and historically it seeks to set a more adequate context for evaluating Coleridge. The motivation for Hedley’s project stems from a belief that part of contemporary philosophy of religion has lodged itself in a cul de sac. Hedley is out to recover the possibility of a rational philosophy of religion grounded in Platonic Christianity and Trinitarian speculation.

By itself, either the historical project or the philosophical project would be plenty ambitious. Yet, the historical project is a first installment of an even grander scheme looming on the horizon of the book, a work that still awaits us, what Hedley calls “an adequate history of modern idealism.” Before this can be done, Hedley takes on the smaller task of rightly situating Coleridge who has been read out of context in a variety of unflattering ways.

First, Coleridge has not been understood in the light of the Trinitarian debates of the time. Second, Coleridge’s Platonism is viewed through the lens of Schleiermacher’s Plato rather than the tradition of middle and Neo Platonism characterized by Ficino and Renaissance Platonism. Although these may seem like separate misunderstandings, Hedley makes a strong case for seeing the two misunderstandings as all piece of a single cloth.

Hedley’s work situates Trinitarian speculation amid Middle Platonism as a way of understanding how a governing and creative form could transcend rationality and at the same time ensure a rational basis for understanding it. The Socinians, like the Arians before them, claimed
that an unbridgeable chasm exists between the infinite and the finite, that is, between God and created nature. Trinitarian speculation sought to hold fast in unity what the Socinians had divided. Hedley notes that a similar dialectic works in Kierkegaard and Barth. Both maintain that beginning from a finite point of view there can be no rational natural theology. And although in both Kierkegaard and Barth a consistent dialectic of finitude may lead to despair, and a consistent dialectic of the infinite may also claim to reveal itself in history as a Teacher, no rational justification exists for the migration from one realm to the other; hence both thinkers appeal for leaps of faith and appeals to revelation.

Hedley notes that other attempts to deal with the difficulty between the finite and the infinite expressed themselves in various forms of monism; notably in Spinoza. In Spinoza's thought the infinite and the finite are collapsed and God and nature dissolved into one another. According to Hedley, Coleridge and the tradition of Platonic idealism attempt to frame a third alternative to fideism and monism. The Platonic tradition in Patristic theology allowed that God was both transcendent and rapt in a joyous contemplation while at the same time immanent in creative activity. Because the contemplation of the divine as a unitary being included an alterity between the persons in the Trinity, the immanent expression of God in the world need not reflect a unity transcending all rational differentiation. Fundamental to this account, Hedley notes, is a voluntaristic account of God's being which avoids the danger of making God's will arbitrary. Coleridge maintains that God's will is prior to God's intellect, because will does not admit of any preceding cause, whereas reason does. Coleridge says, "even in man will is deeper than mind; for mind does not cease to be mind by having an antecedent; but will is either first . . . or it is not will at all" (quoted in Hedley, 82). Still, the will is not arbitrary, for in willing the intellect, there is no possibility of God willing anything other than what is true or good. God is pure act, including the act of understanding; following the Platonic tradition, the good is the measure of itself and of evil. Hedley helps recovers a central claim of Coleridge's thought that God's will, though primordial to reason nevertheless wills in accord with reason.

Following some readings of Kant someone might object that all this metaphysical speculation on the Trinity has no grounding in our experience and dispense with matters. Coleridge, I believe, is well positioned to develop an interesting reply. Hedley quotes Coleridge to the effect that, "the mysteries of Christian faith are reason in its highest form of self-affirmation" (87). The experience of a Kantian critique can take one to the limits of will and understanding, and in the mystery here one can find a fruitful Trinitarian answer to its riddles. In short, the mystery of the Trinity has a philosophical dimension. This is not to say that a full-blown doctrine of the Trinity can emerge on the basis of reason, but that the mystery of our will can lead into mystery of the Trinity. Coleridge has here developed a Kantian passage of ascent, analogous to Neoplatonic accounts. This is a daring assertion and a rich resource for Trinitarian natural theology.

Reading Kant as a springboard for a new speculative metaphysic,
Hedley will probably ruffle a few feathers, for doing so runs counter to many modern readings of Kant. However, this may be all to the good. Coleridge’s understanding of Kant was not bound by modern conventions and, if Hedley is correct, there is stillroom for idealism to make an interesting departure from Kant’s thought that still preserves his insights in a metaphysics of freedom while providing a means of avoiding Kant’s dualisms.

But if Coleridge had so much to offer, why was he overlooked, and why at present has he continued to be overlooked? A parallel question also suggests itself, why was the Platonic tradition also overlooked? Hedley’s answer, in a few words is Schliermacher and Harnack. After Schliermacher and Harnack the Platonic tradition becomes not merely overlooked but invisible. Schliermacher recast the understanding of Plato as essentially an artistic rather than a metaphysical thinker by locating Plato’s essence not in the content, but in the form of his thought—namely the dialogue form. Harnack in his historical quest saw Platonism as a metaphysical element foreign to the gospel, rather than an attempt to formulate a coherent understanding of God revealed in Christ. Doubly disinherited, Coleridge and the tradition of idealism were thus overlooked rather than critically examined. Given the possibility of a restored rational natural philosophy of religion, Hedley’s argument for a return to Coleridgean ideas seems fruitful possibility.

What might motivate a return to a form to Platonism if one is not already so disposed? Hedley suggests that Coleridge offers an intriguing way. The Delphic maxim, know thyself, provides the beginning point. The Platonic notion of ascent maps the way. Drawing on Augustine’s claim that “the true philosopher is a lover of God” Coleridge suggests that the reflexive nature of the quest for self-knowledge will lead to a reflection on the nature of mind and language that has important analogies with a Trinitarian understanding of God.

Hedley turns to a deft account of Coleridge’s philosophy of language. Coleridge defines language as “a living power which enables men to improve their vision of truth” (117). In line with the Augustinian notions of the interior teacher, Coleridge maintains that language has a divine origin and that all knowledge of the truth is in some sense contact with the divine. Language leads us to re-flect and to seek a transcendent origin. Whereas Locke and the Lockean empiricists saw mind as a passive power, Coleridge saw mind and language as an active one. For Coleridge tracing the origins of ideas to a series of impressions and simple elements that form the basis for more complex ideas was a dead end. A Lockean natural theology requires that arguments for the existence of God needed to be amenable to such tracing. Natural theology under this rubric necessarily falls back upon miracles. Biblical language also is understood via the Lockean way of ideas. Although sympathetic with the goal establishing a rational theology of other Lockeans, Coleridge thought that this account of language and rationality is impoverished. Language and reason are spiritual for Coleridge symbolizing an inward experience. Coleridge claims that as a symbol language “partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible” (143). The biblical record is not a
mere historical work to be traced back to sense datum but rather a meeting point in which the human and the divine come together. The language is mystical, experiential, and spiritual. Hedley’s masterful mapping of Coleridge’s linguistic account dovetails with the speculative account of the will in a fruitful fashion that I think merits close attention.

Hedley’s book is a dense work, closely argued on both historical and philosophical grounds and will richly repay a close reading. It will undoubtedly stir controversy among those who, for whatever reasons, conceive of metaphysics as alien to the gospel or as moribund. Hedley introduces a rich cast of characters, especially the Cambridge Platonists and, in particular, Ralph Cudworth. Moving these characters to the foreground is enriching both as history of philosophy as well as philosophy proper. *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion* is a refreshing foray into speculative metaphysics going full tilt. It is heartening to find a willingness to sort through Platonism with a charitable eye. Hedley turns up old resources that are under appreciated and offers a fresh current of life moving within the Neo-Platonic tradition and Trinitarian speculation. Were a list of worthy Platonic scholars being compiled today, Hedley might be the next in the line of those “brisk young thinkers rendering fine things to a reluctant generation.” Heartily recommended.


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Those whose familiarity with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre is limited to his highly influential critique of modern ethical theory, *After Virtue*, may be forgiven for finding his recent publication, *Dependent Rational Animals* (henceforth: DRA), a somewhat puzzling departure. The reason DRA would appear to represent such an abrupt change is his assertion in *After Virtue* that an account of Aristotelian practical reasoning must relinquish any reference to a natural telos, or “metaphysical biology.” However, in subsequent works incrementally, and now most emphatically in DRA, he has fully embraced the view that metaphysics grounded in human biology is ineliminable from a complete account of the ethical life.

In his rich and provocative work since *After Virtue* and prior to DRA, MacIntyre has sought to provide a comprehensive ethical theory and moral epistemology on the basis of the phenomenon of practical reasoning. In its Aristotelian embodiment, practical reasoning describes the process by which the individual pursues goods internal to social practices by acquiring virtues, e.g., wisdom, honesty, and justice, and orienting action to those goods virtuously, i.e., in an excellent manner. This process is inherently social because the novice serves as apprentice to those who have mastered the practice, though this does not preclude the possibility that the novice will one day through acquisition of the relevant virtues exceed or