

# Booknotes

Our view of philosophy, and much else besides, is heavily conditioned by what we think now. In reading philosophers of the past, we are inclined to see them as speaking to us about the concerns we currently think of as philosophical. We ignore those aspects of their work which could not be seamlessly inserted into the deliberations of the Aristotelian Society or the American Philosophical Association. We also overlook figures from the past who may well have been significant philosophers in their own day (and whose day may come again), but whose work appears to throw no light on what are to us vital philosophical matters, such as externalism, supervenience or rational choice.

These reflections are stimulated by Douglas Hedley's *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000). The book is an attempt to reinstate Coleridge as a major religious and philosophical thinker, in the mainstream of the current of thought which flowed from Plato himself through classical neo-Platonism and the Florentine and Cambridge Platonists and on to the idealisms of Britain and America in the nineteenth century, a current which ebbed only in the twentieth century. During the course of his argument Hedley interestingly rebuts the familiar charge that Coleridge lifted much of his thinking from Schelling and the German Idealists. As Coleridge himself said, there was a convergence between himself and Schelling. But this was due not so much to any mutual influence as to an independent interest on the part of both thinkers in the English Platonists, and particularly in Ralph Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*.

As Hedley argues convincingly, Coleridge's own *Aids to Reflection* is 'a complex and rich philosophy of religion'. But it is not a philosophy of religion in the spirit of his contemporary William Paley. Paley is in fact Coleridge's antithesis, religiously and philosophically, collecting 'evidences' from outside and 'proving' that the world stands in need of a designer about whom we can actually know very little, except as vouchsafed by revelation and miracle. Looked at in this light, Paley and Hume (normally, and anachronistically taken to have refuted Paley) are actually very close in spirit.

For Coleridge, as a Christian Platonist, the source of religious insight is within, 'Know Thyself' being the way forward. In Coleridge's own case, self-knowledge was heavily tinged with the 'iron of melancholy' (this being the link between the philosophy and poems like 'The Ancient Mariner' and the Dejection Ode). But guilt—surely the leitmotif of 'The Ancient Mariner'—presupposes a moral sense. Coleridge stands firmly in the line of thinkers from Plato through to Kant and Newman, who have made moral insight and experience central to philosophy.

Coleridge's stress on inner feeling in religion and in life more generally—which makes him an opponent of Paley—does not make him into an

## Booknotes

irrationalist (another common misunderstanding of Coleridge). Quite the contrary; in turning within, and in rational reflection on the conditions of thought, language and morality, we can, for Coleridge, see a rational need for a spiritually transcendent ground. In becoming aware of our natural estrangement from this ground of our being, we can begin to approach it, through spiritual discipline and a reverence for the truth.

Coleridge's vision is one of our intellectual, moral and aesthetic desires reflecting an essential affinity between us, on the one hand, and the world and its source on the other. Many to-day will find this vision implausible, unattractive even. Human beings, for most of us, are no more than intelligent land mammals, here purely by chance, in our lives and culture simply exploiting the opportunities this chance affords us. Even many contemporary religious thinkers prefer not to contest this received view with reason or argument, but to rely instead on a post-modernist leap of faith, inspired perhaps by Kierkegaard or perhaps by Karl Barth. All the more reason then for examining a subtle and a complex development of an alternative vision to the one most of us accept almost without thought. And in reading Coleridge—and Hedley—modern readers will confront a host of fascinating thinkers who are almost entirely neglected in the parochialism of the present.