

# Essays on Bentham and Coleridge

John Stuart Mill

1838

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth; except for two ellipses on page 49, which mark omissions by Mill in quotations from Coleridge. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. —The division of each essay into sections with headings is not Mill's. —For Mill's later thoughts about these two essays of his, see his *Autobiography*, pages 147–8 of the version on the website from which the present text comes.

First launched: December 2018

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## Glossary

**clerisy:** 'A distinct class of learned or literary persons' (OED). This is the 'primary meaning' referred to on page 48.

**Continent:** The continent of Europe excluding Great Britain; similarly with 'continental'.

**disinterested:** Not self-interested.

**entail:** A legal device prohibiting the sale of a property to anyone not descended from the present owner.

**induction:** 'The process of inferring or verifying a general law or principle from the observation of particular instances' (OED); similarly **inductive**.

**nationalty:** Not a typo! See page 48 for an explanation.

**peculiar:** Someone's 'peculiar' qualities (opinions, skills, etc.) are ones that are unique to him, ones that no-one else has.

**philosophes:** French intellectuals of the 18th century.

**point d'appui:** Literally = 'fulcrum'; used on page 22 in its standard meaning of 'place where the troops are assembled before the battle'.

**property:** In some places, especially on pages 54–55, the word is used not as a concrete noun referring to things or stuff that are owned but as an abstract noun meaning 'ownership'. 'Can land be a subject of property?' means 'Can land be owned?'

**sophistry:** Logical trickery. Similarly **sophistical**.

**speculation:** Theorising.

**sympathy:** Fellow-feeling.

## Coleridge

The name of Coleridge is one of the few English names of our time that are likely to be oftener pronounced, and to symbolise more important things, in proportion to how much the inward workings of the age manifest themselves in outward facts. Bentham excepted, no Englishman of recent date has left his impress so deeply in the opinions and mental tendencies of those among us who try to enlighten their practice by philosophical meditation. If it is true, as Bacon affirms, that a knowledge of the speculative opinions of the men between 20 and 30 years of age is the great source of political prophecy, then the existence of Coleridge will show itself by no slight or ambiguous traces in the coming history of our country; for no-one has contributed more to shape the opinions of such among its younger men as have opinions at all.

### Relating Coleridge to Bentham

The influence of Coleridge, like that of Bentham, extends far beyond those who share in the peculiarities [see Glossary] of his religious or philosophical creed. He has been the great awakener in this country of the spirit of philosophy, within the bounds of traditional opinions. He has been, almost as truly as Bentham, 'the great questioner of things established', for a questioner need not be an enemy. By Bentham, beyond all others, men have been led to ask themselves concerning any ancient or received opinion *Is it true?* and by Coleridge *What is the meaning of it?* One took his stand *outside* the received opinion, and surveyed it as an entire stranger to it; the other looked at it from within, and tried to see it with the eyes of a believer in it;

to discover what apparent facts at first suggested it, and what appearances have made it continually credible ever since, making it seem to a succession of persons to be a faithful interpretation of their experience. Bentham judged a proposition true or false depending on whether it accorded with the result of his own inquiries; and he did not search very curiously into what might be meant by the proposition, given that it obviously did not mean something that he thought true. With Coleridge, on the contrary, the very fact that any doctrine had been believed by thoughtful men and accepted by whole nations or generations of mankind was part of the problem to be solved—of the phenomena to be explained. Bentham's short and easy method of explaining everything in terms of the selfish interests of aristocracies, priests, lawyers, or some other species of impostors could not satisfy a man who saw so much further into the complexities of the human intellect and feelings. Coleridge considered the long or widespread prevalence of any opinion as evidence that it was not altogether a fallacy; that its first authors at least were struggling to express in words something that had a reality to them, though perhaps not to many of those who have since accepted the doctrine by mere tradition. The long duration of a belief, he thought, shows that it is adapted to some part of the human mind; and if, on digging down to the root we do not find some *truth* (as we generally do), we shall find some natural *want or requirement* of human nature that the doctrine in question is fitted to satisfy. The instincts of selfishness and of credulity have a place among these wants, but by no means an exclusive one.

From this difference in the points of view of the two philosophers, and from the too-rigid adherence of each

to his own, it was to be expected that Bentham would continually miss the truth that is in the traditional opinions, and Coleridge would miss the truth that is not in them and is at variance with them. But it was also likely that each would find, or show the way to finding, much of what the other missed.

It is hardly possible to speak of Coleridge and his position among his contemporaries without bringing in Bentham; they are connected by two of the closest bonds of association—resemblance, and contrast. It would be hard to find two persons of philosophical eminence more exactly opposite to one another. Compare their modes of treatment of any subject, and you might fancy them to be inhabitants of different worlds. They seem to have scarcely a principle or a premise in common. Each sees hardly anything except what the other does not see. Bentham would have regarded Coleridge with a peculiar measure of the good-humoured contempt with which he was accustomed to regard all kinds of philosophising different from his own. Coleridge—to the credit of his mode of philosophising—extended an enlarged and liberal appreciation to most thinkers of any eminence from whom he differed; but he would probably have made Bentham one of the exceptions to this. But opposites, as logicians say, are merely the things that are furthest from one another *in the same kind*. These two were alike in being the men whose teachings and examples did most, in their age and country, to enforce the need for a philosophy.

They agreed in making it their occupation to bring opinions back to first principles, taking no proposition for granted without examining the grounds for it and ascertaining that it had the kind and degree of evidence suitable to its nature. They agreed in recognising that sound theory is the only foundation for sound practice, and that whoever despises theory—whatever airs of wisdom he may give himself—is

self-convicted of being a quack. If we put into a book all the best things ever said on •the rule-of-thumb school of political craftsmanship, and on •the inadequacy for practical purposes of what the mere practical man calls ‘experience’, it is hard to say whether the collection would owe more to the writings of Bentham or to those of Coleridge. They agreed, too, in perceiving that the groundwork of all other philosophy must be laid in the philosophy of the mind. To lay this foundation deeply and strongly, and to raise a superstructure in accordance with it, were the goals to which their lives were devoted. They used mostly different materials; but the materials of both were real observations—the genuine product of experience—so the results will in the end be found to be not hostile but supplementary to one another. Of their methods of philosophising, the same thing holds: they were different, yet both were legitimate logical processes. In every respect the two men are each other’s ‘completing counterpart’: the strong points of each correspond to the weak points of the other. Anyone who could master the premises and combine the methods of both would possess the entire English philosophy of his age. Coleridge used to say that everyone is born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian; it can be similarly affirmed that every Englishman of the present day is by implication either a Benthamite or a Coleridgean, holding views of human affairs that can be proved true only on the principles of Bentham or those of Coleridge.

In one respect, indeed, the parallel fails. Bentham so improved and added to the system of philosophy he adopted that for his successors he may almost be accounted its founder; while Coleridge, though he has left on the system he inculcated such traces of himself as are bound to be left by any mind with original powers, was •anticipated in all the essentials of his doctrine by the great Germans of the latter

half of the last century, and was accompanied in it by the remarkable series of their French expositors and followers. Hence, although Coleridge is to Englishmen the type and the main source of that doctrine, he is the creator not of the doctrine itself but rather of the shape in which it has appeared among us.

It will take many years for there to be anything like unanimity in the estimation of Coleridge and of his influence on the intellect of our time. As a poet, he has taken his place. The healthier taste and more intelligent canons of poetic criticism that Coleridge was himself mainly instrumental in spreading have at last assigned to him his proper rank as one of the great names in our literature—and, if we look to the powers shown rather than to the amount of actual achievement, one of the *greatest*. But as a philosopher, the class of thinkers has scarcely yet arisen by whom he is to be judged. The limited philosophical public of this country is still too exclusively divided between those to whom Coleridge and the views he promulgated or defended are everything, and those to whom they are nothing. A true thinker cannot be justly estimated until his thoughts have worked their way into minds formed in a different school; have been wrought and moulded into consistency with all other true and relevant thoughts; when the noisy conflict of angrily opposed half-truths has subsided, and ideas that seemed incompatible have been found only to require mutual limitations.

This time has not yet come for Coleridge. The spirit of philosophy in England, like that of religion, is still rootedly sectarian. **a** Conservative thinkers and **b** liberals, **a** transcendentalists and **b** admirers of Hobbes and Locke, regard each other as unfit for philosophical dialogue. They look on each other's speculations as vitiated by a fundamental taint that makes all study of them, except for purposes of

attack, useless if not harmful. An error much like this would have occurred if Kepler had refused to profit by Ptolemy's or Tycho's observations because those astronomers believed that the sun moved round the earth; or if Priestley and Lavoisier, because they differed on the doctrine of phlogiston, had rejected each other's chemical experiments. It is indeed a still greater error than either of those would be. For in the present imperfect state of mental and social science, antagonist modes of thought are *essential*; the time will come when they are felt to be as necessary to one another in speculation as mutually checking powers are in a political constitution. Indeed, a clear insight into this necessity is the only rational or enduring basis for philosophical tolerance, the only condition under which liberality in matters of opinion can be anything better than a polite synonym for indifference between one opinion and another. (This need for opposing modes of thought has long been recognised by Continental [see Glossary] philosophers, but very few Englishmen have yet seen it.)

### Oscillation between extremes

All students of man and society who have the first thing they need for such a difficult study, namely a proper sense of its difficulties, are aware that the constant danger is not so much of accepting falsehood for truth as of mistaking part of the truth for the whole of it. It might be plausibly maintained that in almost every one of the leading controversies, past or present, in social philosophy, both sides were in the right in what they affirmed and wrong in what they denied; and that if either side had been made to accept the other's views in addition to its own, little more would have been needed to make its doctrine correct. Take for instance the question *How far has mankind gained by civilisation?*

One observer is forcibly struck by

- the multiplication of physical comforts,
- the advancement and spread of knowledge,
- the decay of superstition,
- the softening of manners,
- the decline of war and personal conflict,
- the progressive limitation of the tyranny of the strong over the weak,
- the great works accomplished throughout the globe by the co-operation of multitudes;

and he becomes that very common character, the worshipper of 'our enlightened age'. Another is struck not by the value of these advantages but by the high price paid for them:

- the slackening of individual energy and courage,
- the loss of proud and self-relying independence,
- the slavery of so much of mankind to artificial wants,
- their effeminate shrinking from even the shadow of pain,
- the dull, unexciting monotony of their lives and the passionless insipidity, and absence of any marked individuality, in their characters,
- the contrast between the narrow mechanical understanding produced by a life spent in carrying out a fixed task by fixed rules and the varied powers of the man of the woods, whose livelihood and safety constantly depend on his ability to adapt means to ends in an emergency,
- the demoralising effect of great inequalities in wealth and social rank, and
- the sufferings of the great mass of the people of civilised countries, whose wants are scarcely better provided for than those of the savage, while they are bound by a thousand fetters in lieu of the freedom and excitement that are his compensations.

Someone who attends to these things, and only to them, will be apt to infer that savage life is preferable to civilised; that the work of civilisation should as far as possible be undone; and from the premises of Rousseau he may well be led to the practical conclusions of Rousseau's disciple, Robespierre. No two thinkers can be more entirely at variance than the two I have presented—the **a** worshippers of Civilisation and **b** of Independence, of **a** the present and of **b** the remote past. Yet all that is positive in the opinions of each of them is true; and we see •how easy it would be to choose one's path if either half of the truth were the whole of it, and •how hard it may be to develop a set of practical maxims that combine both.

Another example. One person sees in a very strong light the need the great mass of mankind have of being ruled over by a degree of intelligence and virtue superior to their own. He is deeply impressed with the harm done to uneducated and uncultivated folk by weaning them from all habits of reverence, appealing to them as a competent tribunal to decide the most intricate questions, and making them think themselves capable not only of being a light to themselves but of giving the law to their superiors in culture. He sees further that cultivation, to be carried beyond a certain point, requires leisure; that leisure is the natural attribute of a hereditary aristocracy; that such a body has all the means of acquiring intellectual and moral superiority; and he can easily endow them with abundant motives for it. He cannot help seeing that aristocrats, being human, need (as do their inferiors) to be controlled and enlightened by a wisdom and goodness still greater than their own. He relies for this on reverence for a Higher ·power· above them, carefully inculcated and fostered by the course of their education. We thus see brought together all the elements of a conscientious zealot for an **aristocratic** government, supporting and supported

by an established Christian church. There is important truth in this thinker's premises. But there is a thinker of a very different kind whose premises contain an equal portion of truth. He is the one who says that an average man—even an average aristocrat—if he can subordinate the interests of other people to his own calculations or instincts of self-interest, will do so; that all governments in all ages have done so, as far as they were permitted, and generally to a ruinous extent; and that the only possible remedy is a pure **democracy**, in which the people are their own governors, and can have no selfish interest in oppressing themselves.

That's how it is with every important partial truth; there are always two conflicting modes of thought, one tending to give to that truth too large, the other to give it too small, a place: and the history of opinion is generally an oscillation between the extremes. Because of the imperfection of the human faculties, it seldom happens, even in the minds of eminent thinkers, that each partial view of their subject is credited with its worth and no more than its worth. But even if this just balance does exist in the mind of the wiser teacher, it will not exist in his disciples, let alone in the general mind. He cannot prevent what is new in his doctrine—which he is forced to insist on the most strongly because it is new—from making a disproportionate impression. The impetus needed to overcome the obstacles that resist all novelties of opinion usually carries the public mind almost as far on the opposite side of the perpendicular. Thus every excess in either direction produces a corresponding reaction; and the only improvement comes from the fact that each time the oscillation is a little less wide than before, so that there is an ever-increasing tendency to settle finally in the centre.

Now the Germano-Coleridgean doctrine is, in my view, the result of such a reaction. It expresses human mind's revolt the against the philosophy of the 18th century. It is

- ontological because the other was experimental;
- conservative because the other was innovative;
- religious because so much of the other was infidel;
- concrete and historical because the other was abstract and metaphysical;
- poetical because the other was matter-of-fact and prosaic.

In every respect it flies off in the opposite direction to its predecessor; yet faithful to the general law of improvement that I have just mentioned, it is less extreme in its opposition—denying less of what is true in the doctrine it wars against—than had been the case in any previous philosophic reaction; and in particular, far less than when the philosophy of the 18th century triumphed over what preceded it, memorably abusing its victory.

### **The dispute about sources of knowledge**

I could start my consideration of the two systems either with their highest philosophical generalisations or with their ·ground-floor· practical conclusions. The former seems preferable, because it is in their highest generalities that the difference between the two systems is most commonly known.

Every consistent scheme of philosophy has to start with a theory about •the sources of human knowledge and •the things the human faculties are capable of coming to know about. On this most comprehensive of questions the prevailing theory in the 18th century was that proclaimed by Locke, and commonly attributed to Aristotle—that all knowledge consists of generalisations from experience. According to this theory, we know nothing about nature or anything whatever external to ourselves except •the facts that present themselves to our senses and •such other facts as can by analogy



be inferred from these. There is no knowledge *a priori*; no truths knowable by the mind's inward light and based on intuitive evidence. Sensation and the mind's awareness of its own acts are not only the exclusive *sources* but the sole *materials* of our knowledge. Coleridge strongly dissents from this doctrine, as do the German philosophers since Kant (not to go further back) and most of the English since Reid. He claims that the human mind is able within certain limits to perceive the nature and properties of 'Things in themselves'. He distinguishes in the human intellect two faculties, which, in the technical language he shares with the Germans, he calls Understanding and Reason. The former faculty judges concerning phenomena, i.e. the appearances of things, and forms generalisations from these; it is the role of the latter to perceive things by direct intuition, recognising truths not knowable by our senses. These perceptions are not indeed innate, and could never have been awakened in us without experience; but they are not copies of it: experience is only the occasion [here = 'trigger'] by which they are irresistibly suggested. The appearances in nature arouse in us, by an inherent law, ideas of the invisible things that are the causes of the visible appearances, and on whose laws those appearances depend; and we then perceive that these things must have pre-existed to make the appearances possible; just as (to use a frequent illustration of Coleridge's) we see before we know that we have eyes, but once this is known to us we perceive that eyes must have pre-existed to enable us to see. Among the truths that are thus known *a priori*—by occasion of experience, but not themselves the subjects of experience—Coleridge includes •the fundamental doctrines of religion and morals, •the principles of mathematics, and •the ultimate laws even of physical nature; which he contends cannot be proved by experience, though they must be consistent with it, and would, if we knew them perfectly,

enable us to account for all observed facts and to predict all those that are not yet observed.

Everyone who concerns himself with such subjects knows that between the partisans of these two opposite doctrines there reigns a *bellum internecinum* [= 'war of mutual destruction']. Neither side is sparing in the imputation of intellectual and moral dishonesty to its antagonists' perceptions, and of pernicious consequences to their creed. *Sensualism* is the common term of abuse for the one philosophy, *mysticism* for the other. One doctrine is accused of making men beasts, the other of making them lunatics. Many on one side of the controversy sincerely believe that their adversaries are driven by a desire to break loose from moral and religious obligation; and many on the other side think that their opponents are either men fit for a madhouse or men who cunningly pander to the interests of hierarchies and aristocracies by manufacturing superfine new arguments in favour of old prejudices. I hardly need say that those who are freest with these mutual accusations are seldom those who are most at home in the real intricacies of the question, or who are best acquainted with the argumentative strength of the opposite side, or even of their own. But without going to these extreme lengths, even sober men on each side have an uncharitable view of the tendencies of the other side's opinions.

It is said that the doctrine of Locke and his followers, that all knowledge is experience generalised, leads by strict logical consequence to atheism; that Hume and other sceptics were right when they contended that it is impossible to prove a God on grounds of experience; and Coleridge (like Kant) maintains positively that the ordinary argument for a Deity, from marks of design in the universe—i.e. from the resemblance of the order in nature to the effects of human skill and contrivance—is not tenable. It is further said that the same doctrine annihilates moral obligation; reducing

morality either to the blind impulses of animal sensibility, or to a calculation of prudential consequences, both equally fatal to morality's essence. Even science, it is said, loses the character of science on this view of it, and becomes empiricism—a mere enumeration and arrangement of facts, not explaining or accounting for them, because a fact is only accounted for when we see in it the manifestation of laws which, as soon as they are perceived at all, are perceived to be *necessary*. These are the charges brought by the transcendental philosophers against the school of Locke, Hartley, and Bentham.

They in their turn allege that the transcendentalists make imagination, and not observation, the criterion of truth; that they lay down principles under which a man may enthrone his wildest dreams in the chair of philosophy, and impose them on mankind as intuitions of 'pure reason', which has in fact been done by all sorts of mystical fanatics down the centuries. And even if the private revelations of any individual Behmen or Swedenborg are disowned—i.e. outvoted, this being the only means of discrimination that the theory is said by its opponents to allow—this is still only substituting, as the test of truth, the dreams of the majority for the dreams of each individual. Any group that forms a strong enough party can at any time set up the immediate perceptions of *their* reason, i.e. of any reigning prejudice, as a truth independent of experience; a truth not only requiring no proof but to be believed in opposition to all that appears proof to the mere understanding; indeed, the more to be believed because it cannot be put into words and into the logical form of a proposition without a contradiction in terms; for no less authority than this is claimed by some transcendentalists for their *a priori* truths. And thus a ready mode is provided by which whoever is on the strongest side may dogmatise at his ease, and instead of proving his propositions may scold all

who deny them as being bereft of 'the vision and the faculty divine', or blinded to its plainest revelations by a corrupt heart.

This is a very temperate statement of the accusations these two classes of thinkers bring against each other. How much of either representation is correct cannot conveniently be discussed here. In truth, a system of consequences drawn from an opinion by an adversary of it is seldom worth much. Disputants are rarely sufficiently masters of each other's doctrines to be good judges what is fairly deducible from them, or how a consequence that seems to flow from one part of the theory may or may not be defeated by another part. To combine the different parts of a doctrine with one another, and with all admitted truths, is not indeed a small trouble or one a person is often inclined to take for other people's opinions. Enough if each does it for his own, which he has a greater interest in and is more disposed to be fair to. If we searched among men's recorded thoughts for the choicest examples of human stupidity and prejudice, our specimens would mostly come from their opinions of one another's opinions. Imputations of horrid consequences ought not to bias the judgment of any person capable of independent thought. Coleridge himself wrote: 'He who begins by loving Christianity better than truth will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all.'

As to the fundamental difference of opinion respecting the sources of our knowledge (apart from the corollaries either party may have drawn from its own principle or imputed to its opponent's), the question lies far too deep in the recesses of psychology for me to discuss it here. The lists having been open ever since the dawn of philosophy, it is not surprising that the two parties should have been forced to put on their strongest armour, both of attack and of defence.

The question would not so long have remained a question if the more obvious arguments on either side had been unanswerable. Each party has been able to urge in its own favour numerous and striking facts, and reconciling these with the opposing theory has required all the metaphysical resources the opposing theory could command. You will not be surprised, then, that I here content myself with a bare statement of my opinion. It is that the truth on this much-debated question lies with the school of Locke and of Bentham. The nature and laws of 'Things in themselves', i.e. the hidden causes of the phenomena that are the objects of experience, seem to me to be radically inaccessible to the human faculties. I see no ground for believing that anything can be the object of our knowledge except •our experience and •what can be inferred from our experience by the analogies of experience itself; or for believing that there is any idea, feeling, or power in the human mind that needs some other source in order to account for it. I am therefore at issue with Coleridge on the central idea of his philosophy; and I find no need of, and have no use for, the peculiar technical terminology that he and his masters the Germans have introduced into philosophy for the double purpose of •giving logical precision to doctrines that I do not admit, and of •marking a relation between those abstract doctrines and many concrete experimental truths—a relation which this language, in my judgment, serves not to clarify but to disguise and obscure. Indeed, if it weren't for these peculiarities [see Glossary] of language, it would be hard to understand how the reproach of mysticism (which in common parlance simply means unintelligibility) has been fixed on Coleridge and the Germans in the minds of many people to whom substantially the same doctrines, when taught by Reid and Dugald Stewart in a more superficial way and less fenced round against objections, have appeared to be

the plain dictates of 'common sense', successfully asserted *against* the subtleties of metaphysics.

Yet though I think the doctrines of Coleridge and the Germans, in the pure science of mind, to be erroneous, and though I have no taste for their peculiar terminology, I am far from thinking that even in respect of this least valuable part of their intellectual exertions those philosophers have lived in vain. The doctrines of the school of Locke needed an entire renovation. To borrow a physiological illustration from Coleridge, they required, like certain secretions of the human body, to be reabsorbed into the system and secreted afresh. In what form did that philosophy generally prevail throughout Europe? In what may be the shallowest set of doctrines that were ever passed off on a cultivated age as a complete psychological system—the ideology of Condillac and his school; a system that purported to resolve all the phenomena of the human mind into 'sensation', by a process that essentially consisted in merely *calling* all states of mind, however heterogeneous, by that name; a philosophy now acknowledged to consist solely of a set of verbal generalisations, explaining nothing, distinguishing nothing, leading to nothing. That men should begin by sweeping this away was the first sign that the age of real psychology was about to commence.

In England the case, though different, was scarcely better. The philosophy of Locke, as a popular doctrine, had remained nearly as it stood in his own book, which, as its title implies, did not claim to give an account of any but the intellectual part of our nature; and even within that limited sphere it was only the start of a system. Its errors and defects have been exaggerated beyond all just bounds, but it did expose many vulnerable points to the searching criticism of the new school. The least imperfect part of it, the purely logical part, had almost dropped out of sight. With respect to those of

Locke's doctrines that are properly metaphysical: however the *sceptical* part of them may have been followed up by others, and carried beyond the point at which he stopped, the only one of his successors who attempted (and achieved) any considerable improvement and extension of the *analytical* part, thereby adding to the explanation of the human mind on Locke's principles, was Hartley. But Hartley's doctrines, so far as they are true, were so much in advance of the age, and the way had been so little prepared for them by the general tone of thinking that still prevailed even under the influence of Locke's writings, that the philosophical world did not regard them as being worthy of being attended to. Reid and Stewart were allowed to run them down uncontradicted; Brown, though a man of a similar spirit, evidently never read them; and but for the accident of their being taken up by Priestley, who transmitted them as a kind of heirloom to his Unitarian followers, the name of Hartley might have perished, or survived only as the name of a visionary physician, the author of an exploded physiological hypothesis. It may have required all the violence of the assaults made by Reid and the German school on Locke's system to recall men's minds to Hartley's principles, as alone adequate to the solution on that system of the peculiar difficulties that those assailants pressed on men's attention as altogether insoluble by it.

Coleridge, before he adopted his later philosophical views, was an enthusiastic Hartleian; so that his abandonment of the philosophy of Locke cannot be imputed to ignorance of the highest form of that philosophy that had yet appeared. His passing through that highest form without stopping at it is itself a strong reason to think there were more difficulties in the question than Hartley had solved. That anything has since been done to solve them we probably owe to the revolution in opinion of which Coleridge was one of the organs; and even in abstract metaphysics, his writings—and

those of his school of thinkers—are the richest mine from which the opposite school can draw the materials for what remains to be done to perfect their own theory.

### **The practical doctrines of the two schools**

If we now pass from the purely abstract to the concrete and practical doctrines of the two schools, we shall see still more clearly the necessity of the reaction, and the great service rendered to philosophy by its authors. This will be best shown by a survey of the state of practical philosophy in Europe, as Coleridge and his associated found it, towards the close of the last century.

The state of opinion in the latter half of the 18th century was by no means the same on the Continent of Europe as in our own island; and the difference was still greater in appearance than it was in reality. In the more advanced nations of the Continent, the prevailing philosophy had done its work completely: it had spread itself over every department of human knowledge; it had taken possession of the whole Continental mind, and scarcely one educated person was left who retained any allegiance to the opinions or institutions of ancient times. In England, the country where compromise was *born*, things had stopped far short of this; the philosophical movement had been brought to a halt at an early stage, and a peace had been patched up by concessions on both sides, between the philosophy of the time and the country's traditional institutions and creeds. Hence the aberrations of the age were generally on the Continent the extravagances of new opinions, in England the corruptions of old ones.

I hardly need to stress the deficiencies of the Continental philosophy of the last century—the so-called 'French philosophy'. That philosophy is indeed as unpopular in England

as its bitterest enemy could desire. If its faults were as well understood as they are much scolded, criticism might be considered to have finished its work. But this is not yet the case. Of the accusations currently made against the French philosophers, many are as inconsistent with a sound philosophical grasp of their thought as with charity towards the men themselves. It is not true, for example, that any of them denied moral obligation or sought to weaken its force. So far were they from deserving this accusation that they could not even tolerate the writers who, like Helvetius, ascribed a selfish origin to the feelings of morality. . . . Those writers were as much cried down among the *philosophes* [see Glossary] themselves, and the considerable amount that was true and good in them met with as little appreciation then as it does now. The error of the philosophers was rather that they trusted too much to those ·moral· feelings, believing them to be more deeply rooted in human nature and less dependent on collateral influences than they are in fact. They thought the feelings to be the natural and spontaneous growth of the human heart, so firmly fixed in it that they would survive unharmed—indeed invigorated—when the whole system of opinions and observances they were habitually intertwined with was violently torn away.

Tearing away was indeed all that most of these philosophers aimed at; they had no conception that anything else was needed. They hoped for a time when superstition, priestcraft, error and prejudice of every kind would be annihilated; some of them gradually added that despotism and hereditary privileges must share the same fate; and they never for a moment suspected that when this was accomplished the virtues and graces of humanity might fail to flourish, i.e. that when the noxious weeds had been rooted out, the soil would need to be cultivated.

In this they committed the common error of mistaking

•the state of things they had always been familiar with for  
 •the universal and natural condition of mankind. They were accustomed to seeing the human race agglomerated in large nations, all (except the occasional madman or criminal) obeying more or less strictly a set of laws prescribed by a few of their own number, and a set of moral rules prescribed by each other's opinion; renouncing the exercise of individual will and judgment except within the limits imposed by these laws and rules; and accepting the sacrifice of their individual wishes when the point was decided against them by lawful authority, or persevering only in hopes of altering the opinion of the ruling powers. Finding matters to be so generally in this condition, the philosophers apparently concluded that they could not possibly be in any other. They simply did not know what a host of civilising and restraining influences has contributed to this state of things that is so repugnant to man's self-will and love of independence, and how imperatively it demands the continuance of those influences as the condition of its own existence. The very first element of the social union, namely obedience to a government of some sort, has not been found easy to establish in the world. Among a timid and spiritless race, like the inhabitants of the vast plains of tropical countries, •passive obedience may be of natural growth; though even there I doubt whether •it has ever been found among any people with whom fatalism—i.e. submission to the pressure of circumstances as the decree of God—did not prevail as a religious doctrine. But the difficulty of inducing a brave and warlike race to submit their individual *arbitrium* to any common umpire has always been felt to be so great that nothing short of supernatural power could overcome it; and such tribes have always assigned a divine origin to the first institution of civil society. Those who knew savage man by actual experience judge very differently from those who had no acquaintance with him except in the

civilised state. In modern Europe after the fall of the Roman empire, subduing feudal anarchy and bringing the whole people of any European nation into subjection to government (although Christianity in the most concentrated form of its influence was co-operating in the work) required three times as many centuries as have elapsed since that time.

Now, if these philosophers had known human nature in any way other than through their own age and through the particular classes of society they lived among, it would have occurred to them that wherever this habitual submission to law and government has been firmly and durably established, and yet the vigour and manliness of character that resisted its establishment have been to some extent preserved, certain conditions have been fulfilled, of which the following may be regarded as the principal.

### **Requirements for political stability**

(1) There has existed, for all who were accounted citizens—for all who were not slaves, kept down by brute force—a system of education, beginning with infancy and continued through life, of which one main and incessant ingredient was restraining discipline—training the human being in the habit, and thence the power, of

- subordinating his personal impulses and aims to what were regarded as the goals of society,
- adhering against all temptation to the course of conduct that those ends prescribed,
- controlling in himself all the feelings that were liable to militate against those goals, and encouraging all that tended towards them.

Every outward motive that the authorities could command, and every inward power or drive that their knowledge of human nature enabled them to evoke, were to serve this

purpose. The entire civil and military policy of the ancient commonwealths was such a system of training; in modern nations its place has been attempted to be taken principally by religious teaching. And whenever the strictness of the restraining discipline was somewhat relaxed, the natural tendency of mankind to anarchy reasserted itself to a corresponding extent; the State became disorganised from within; mutual conflict for selfish ends neutralised the energies required for the contest against *natural* causes of evil; and the nation, after a longer or briefer interval of progressive decline, became the slave of a despotism or else the prey of a foreign invader.

(2) The second condition of permanent political society has been the existence, in some form or other, of the feeling of allegiance, or loyalty. This feeling may vary in its objects, and is not confined to any particular form of government; but whether in a democracy or in a monarchy, its essence is always the same, namely that there is in the constitution of the State something that is settled, something permanent, and not to be called in question; something that is generally agreed to have a right to be where it is and to be secure against disturbance, whatever else may change. This feeling may attach itself—as among the Jews (and indeed in most of the commonwealths of antiquity)—to a common God or gods, the protectors and guardians of their State. Or it may attach itself to certain persons who are deemed to be the rightful guides and guardians of the rest, whether by divine appointment, by long prescription, or by the general recognition of their superior capacity and worthiness. Or it may attach itself to laws; to ancient liberties, or ordinances. Or finally (and this is the only form in which the feeling is likely to exist from now on) it may attach itself to the principles of individual freedom and political and social equality, as realised in institutions that don't yet exist anywhere

except perhaps in a rudimentary state. But in every political society that has had a durable existence there has been some fixed point, something that men agreed in holding sacred. Wherever freedom of discussion was a recognised principle, it was of course lawful to contest this in theory, but no-one could either fear or hope to see it shaken in practice; in short (except perhaps during some temporary crisis), it was by common consent placed beyond discussion. And the necessity of this can easily be made evident. A State never is—and until mankind are vastly improved, can never hope to be—for any long time exempt from internal dissension; for there has never been any state of society in which collisions did not occur between the immediate interests and passions of powerful sections of the people. What, then, enables society to weather these storms, and pass through turbulent times without any permanent weakening of the guarantees of peaceable existence? Precisely this:

However important the interests men were quarrelling about, the conflict did not •affect the fundamental principles of the system of social union that happened to exist, •or threaten large portions of the community with subversion of the basis on which they had built their calculations and with which their hopes and aims had become identified.

But when the questioning of these fundamental principles, rather than being the *occasional* disease or salutary medicine, is the *habitual* condition of the body politic, and when all the violent animosities are called forth that spring naturally from such a situation, the State is virtually in a position of civil war, and cannot long remain free from it in act and fact.

(3) The third essential condition of stability in political society is a strong and active force of *cohesion* among the members of the same community or state. I need scarcely

say that I do not mean 'nationality' in the vulgar sense of the term:

- a senseless antipathy to foreigners,
- an indifference to the general welfare of the human race, or an unjust preference for the supposed interests of our own country;
- a cherishing of bad peculiarities [see Glossary] because they are national, or a refusal to adopt what has been found good by other countries.

I mean a force of sympathy, not of hostility; of union, not of separation. I mean a feeling of common interest among those who live under the same government and are contained within the same natural or historical boundaries. I mean that one part of the community do not consider themselves as foreigners with regard to another part; that they set a value on their connection; feel that they are one people, that their lot is cast together, that evil to any of their fellow-countrymen is evil to themselves; and do not selfishly want to free themselves from their share of any common inconvenience by breaking the connection. Everyone knows how strong this feeling was in the ancient commonwealths that attained any durable greatness. How happily Rome, in spite of all its tyranny, succeeded in establishing the feeling of a common country among the provinces of its vast and divided empire, will be obvious when anyone who has given due attention to the subject takes the trouble to point it out.

·START OF LONG FOOTNOTE·

I am glad to quote a striking passage from Coleridge's *Church and State* on this very subject. He is speaking of the misdeeds of England in Ireland; towards which misdeeds this Tory entertained feelings scarcely surpassed by the feelings aroused by M. de Beaumont's recent masterly exposure. (I call him a Tory because the Tories, who neglected him in his

lifetime, are eager to give themselves the credit of his name after his death.) He writes:

‘Let us discharge what may well be regarded as a debt of justice from every well-educated Englishman to his Roman Catholic fellow-subjects of the Sister Island. At least, let us ourselves understand the true cause of the evil as it now exists. To what and to whom is the present state of Ireland mainly to be attributed? I answer aloud, that it is mainly attributable •to those who during a period of little less than a century used as a substitute what Providence had given into their hand as an opportunity; •to those who chose to consider as superseding the most sacred duty a code of law that could be excused only on the plea that it enabled them to perform their duty; •to the sloth and wastefulness, the weakness and wickedness, of the gentry, clergy and governors of Ireland, who persevered in preferring intrigue, violence, and selfish expatriation [shipping goods to England] to a system of preventive and remedial measures, the efficacy of which had been warranted for them alike by the whole provincial history of ancient Rome, and by the happy results of the few exceptions to the contrary scheme unhappily pursued by their and our ancestors.

‘I can imagine no work of genius that would more appropriately decorate the dome or wall of a Senate-house than an abstract of Irish history from the landing of Strongbow to the battle of the Boyne or to a yet later period, embodied in intelligible emblems—an allegorical history-piece designed in the spirit of a Rubens or a Michelangelo, and with the wild lights, ominous shades and saturated colours of a Rembrandt, Caravaggio, and Spagnoletti. All that would be needed to complete the great moral and political lesson by the historic contrast is some equally effective means to possess the spectator’s mind with the state and condition of ancient Spain less than half a century after the final conclusion of

an obstinate and almost unremitting conflict of two hundred years by Agrippa’s subjugation of the Cantabrians. . . . At the breaking up of the Roman Empire, the West Goths conquered the country and made division of the lands. Then came eight centuries of Moorish domination. Yet so deeply had Roman wisdom impressed the fairest characters of the Roman mind that even today, if we except a comparatively insignificant portion of Arabic derivatives, the natives throughout the whole Spanish Peninsula speak a language less different from the *Romana rustica* or provincial Latin of the times of Lucan and Seneca than any two of its dialects differ from each other. I hope the time is coming when our political economists will study the provincial policy of the ancients in detail, under the auspices of hope, for immediate and practical purposes.’

•END OF FOOTNOTE•

[Picking up from the remark about Rome’s success ‘in establishing the feeling of a common country’ across its vast empire.] In modern times the countries that have had that feeling in the strongest degree have been the most powerful countries; England, France, and—in proportion to their territory and resources—Holland and Switzerland; while England in its connection with Ireland is one of the most striking examples of what results from its absence. Every Italian knows why Italy is under a foreign yoke; every German knows what maintains despotism in the Austrian empire; the evils of Spain flow as much from the absence of nationality among the Spaniards themselves as from the presence of it in their relations with foreigners; while the completest illustration of all is provided by the republics of South America, where the parts of a single state adhere together so slightly that as soon as any province thinks itself aggrieved by the general government it proclaims itself a separate nation.



The French philosophers of the 18th century unfortunately overlooked these essential requisites of civil society. Indeed, they found **(1)** and **(2)** and most of what nourishes and invigorates **(3)** to be already undermined by the vices of the institutions and men that were set up as the guardians and bulwarks of them. If innovators in their *theories* disregarded the elementary principles of the social union, Conservatives in their *practice* had set the first example. The existing order of things had ceased to reflect those first principles: because of the force of circumstances and the short-sighted selfishness of its administrators, it no longer satisfied the essential conditions of permanent society, and was therefore tottering to its fall. But the philosophers did not see this. Bad as the existing system was in the days of its decrepitude, according to them it was still worse when it actually did what it now only claimed to do. Instead of feeling that the effect of a bad social order in undermining the necessary foundations of society itself is one of the worst of its many harms, the philosophers only saw, joyfully, that it was undermining its own foundations. In the weakening of all government they saw only the weakening of bad government; and they thought they could not better employ themselves than in finishing the task so well begun: •discrediting all that still remained of restraining discipline, because it rested on the ancient and decayed creeds against which they made war; •unsettling everything that was still considered settled, making men doubtful of the few things they still felt certain of; and •uprooting what little remained in the people's minds of reverence for anything above them, of respect to any of the limits that custom and law had set to the indulgence of each man's fancies or inclinations, or of attachment to any of the things that belonged to them as a nation and made them feel their unity as such.

### Political rebuilding

No doubt much of this was unavoidable, and not fairly a matter for blame. When the vices of all constituted authorities, added to natural causes of decay, have eaten the heart out of old institutions and beliefs, and the growth of knowledge and the altered circumstances of the age would have required institutions and creeds different from these even if they had remained uncorrupt, I am far from saying that any level of wisdom on the part of speculative thinkers could avert the political catastrophes—and the subsequent moral anarchy and unsettledness—that we have witnessed and are witnessing. Still less do I claim that the forces and influences that I have listed as conditions of the permanent existence of the social union, once they have been lost, can ever be, or should be attempted to be, revived in connection with the same institutions or the same doctrines as before. When society needs to be rebuilt, it is useless trying to rebuild it on the old plan. By the union of •the enlarged views and analytic powers of speculative men with •the observation and designing skills of men of practice, better institutions and better doctrines must be developed; and until this is done we cannot hope for much improvement in our present condition. The effort to do it in the 18th century would have been premature, as the attempts of the Economistes (who, of all persons then living, came nearest to it, and who were the first to form clearly the idea of a Social Science), sufficiently testify. The time was not ripe for doing effectively any work except that of destruction. But the work of the day should have been done in such a way as not to impede that of the morrow. No-one can calculate what struggles that the cause of improvement has yet to undergo might have been spared if the philosophers of the 18th century had done anything like justice to the Past. Their mistake was that they

did not acknowledge the historical value of much that had ceased to be useful, and did not see that institutions and creeds that had become effete had given essential services to civilisation and still filled, in the human mind and in the arrangements of society, a place that could not without great peril be left empty. Their mistake was that they did not recognise in many of the errors they attacked corruptions of important truths, and in many of the institutions most infected with abuse necessary elements of civilised society, though in a form no longer suited to the age. So they involved many great truths in a common discredit with the errors that had grown up around them. They threw away the shell without preserving the kernel; and trying to new-model society without the binding forces that hold society together they met with such success as might have been expected.

Now I claim on behalf of the philosophers of the reactionary school—of the school to which Coleridge belongs—that they have *done* exactly what I have just blamed the philosophers of the 18th century for *not* doing.

Every reaction in opinion inevitably brings into view the portion of the truth that was overlooked before. It was natural that •a philosophy that anathematised [= 'solemnly condemned'] everything that had been going on in Europe from Constantine to Luther, or even to Voltaire, should be succeeded by •another that was both a severe critic of the new tendencies of society and an impassioned defender of what was good in the past. This is the easy merit of all Tory and Royalist writers. But the peculiarity [see Glossary] of the Germano-Coleridgean school is that they saw beyond the immediate controversy to the fundamental principles involved in *all* such controversies. They were the first (except a solitary thinker here and there) who inquired with any comprehensiveness or depth into the inductive [see Glossary] laws of the existence and growth of human society. They were

the first to bring prominently forward the three requisites I have listed [on pages 38–40] as essential forces behind all permanent forms of social existence; as *forces*, I say, and not as mere accidental advantages of the particular politics or religion that the writer happened to patronise. They were the first who pursued philosophically and in the spirit of Baconian investigation, not only this inquiry, but others behind and collateral to it. They thus produced not a piece of party advocacy but a philosophy of society in the only form in which that is still possible, namely as a philosophy of history; not a defence of particular ethical or religious doctrines, but a contribution—the largest made by any class of thinkers—towards the philosophy of human culture.

### **Learning from history**

The brilliant light that has been thrown on history during the last half century has come almost wholly from this school. The disrespect in which history was held by the *philosophes* is notorious; one of the soberest of them, D'Alembert I believe, was the author of the wish that all record of past events could be blotted out. And indeed the ordinary way of writing history and the ordinary way of drawing lessons from it were almost sufficient to excuse this contempt. But the *philosophes* saw what wasn't true, not what was. It is no wonder that they—who looked on most of what had been handed down from the past as sheer hindrances to man's achieving a well-being that would otherwise be easy to get—should content themselves with a very superficial study of history. But the case was otherwise with those who regarded the maintenance of society at all, and especially its maintenance in a state of progressive advancement, as a very difficult task that had actually been achieved, however imperfectly, for a number of centuries against the strongest

obstacles. It was natural that they should feel a deep interest in discovering how this had been done, and be led to ask •what the requisites were of the permanent existence of the body politic, and •what the conditions were that had made the preservation of these permanent requisites compatible with perpetual and progressive improvement. And hence that series of great writers and thinkers from Herder to Michelet, by whom history—that was till then ‘a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’ [quoted from *Macbeth*—has been made a science of causes and effects. By making the facts and events of the past have a meaning and an intelligible place in the gradual evolution of humanity, they have *both* given history (even to the imagination) an interest like romance, *and* provided the only means of predicting and guiding the future, by unfolding the agencies that have produced and still maintain the Present.

The same causes have naturally led the same class of thinkers to do for the philosophy of human culture what their predecessors never could have done. The tendency of their speculations compelled them to see the character of the national education in any political society as being both

- the principal cause of its permanence as a society, by operating as a system of restraining discipline, and
- the chief source of its progressiveness, to the extent that it called forth and invigorated the active faculties.

Besides, not to have looked on the culture of the inward man as the problem of problems would have been incompatible with the Christian belief that many of these philosophers had, and the recognition by all of them of Christianity’s historical value and its large role in the progress of mankind. But here, too, they rose to ·very general· principles and did not stay with the particular case ·of a single religion·. The culture of the human being had been carried to extraordinary heights and human nature had exhibited many of its noblest mani-

festations not only in Christian countries but in the ancient world—in Athens, Sparta, Rome. Indeed even barbarians such as the Germans or still more unmitigated savages, the wild Indians, all had their own education, their own culture; and so did the Chinese, the Egyptians and the Arabs. In each case, this culture, whatever might be its tendency on the whole, had been successful in some respect or other. Every form of polity, every condition of society, whatever else it had done, had formed its type of national character. What that type was, and how it had been made to be what it was, were questions that the metaphysician might overlook, but the historical philosopher could not. Accordingly, the views about the various elements of human culture and the causes influencing the formation of national character, which pervade the writings of the Germano-Coleridgean school, throw into the shade everything that had been achieved before or that has been attempted simultaneously by any other school. Such views are chiefly the characteristic feature of the Goethian period of German literature, and are richly diffused through the historical and critical writings of the new French school, as well as of Coleridge and his followers.

In this long [from page 32 to here] though most compressed dissertation on the Continental philosophy preceding the reaction, and on the nature of the reaction directed against that philosophy, I have unavoidably been led to speak of the movement itself rather than of Coleridge’s particular share in it; and, given that he came somewhat later, his share was necessarily a subordinate one. And it would be useless, even if my limits permitted, to bring together from the scattered writings of a man who produced no systematic work any of the fragments that he may have contributed to an edifice that is still incomplete, and even the general character of which I cannot have made perfectly intelligible to those who are not acquainted with the theory itself. My aim is to invite

readers to the study of the original sources, not to substitute for such a study. What was peculiar to Coleridge will be better exhibited when I now proceed to review the state of popular philosophy immediately preceding him in our own island; which was different in some significant respects from the contemporaneous Continental philosophy.

### **Setting the scene for Coleridge: politics**

In England the philosophical speculations of the age had not—except in a few highly metaphysical minds, whose example served to deter rather than to invite others—taken such an audacious flight, or achieved anything like as complete a victory over the counteracting influences, as was achieved on the Continent. There is in the English mind, both in speculation and in practice, a highly salutary shrinking from all extremes. But as this shrinking is an instinct of caution rather than a result of insight, it is too ready to accept any medium merely because it is a medium, and to agree to a union of the disadvantages of both extremes instead of a union of their advantages. The circumstances of the age, too, were unfavourable to decided opinions.

- The peace that followed the great struggles of the Reformation and the Commonwealth;
- the final victory over Popery and Puritanism, Jacobitism and Republicanism, and
- the lulling of the controversies that kept speculation and spiritual consciousness alive;
- the lethargy that came over all governors and teachers after their position in society became fixed; and
- the growing absorption of all classes in material interests

—all this caused the diffusion of a state of mind with less deep inward workings and less ability to interpret those it did

have, than had existed for centuries. The age seemed smitten with an incapacity for producing deep or strong feeling such as at least could *ally itself* with meditative habits. There were few poets, and none of a high order; and philosophy fell mostly into the hands of men of a dry prosaic nature, who had not enough of the materials of human feeling in them to be able to imagine any of its more complex and mysterious manifestations; all of which they either left out of their theories, or introduced with explanations that could not be accepted as adequate by anyone who had experienced the feelings. An age like this, an age without earnestness, was the natural era of compromises and half-convictions.

To make out a case for the feudal and ecclesiastical institutions of modern Europe was by no means impossible; they had a meaning, had existed for honest ends, and an honest theory of them could be made. But the administration of those institutions had long ceased to square with any honest theory. It was impossible to justify them in principle except on grounds that •condemned them in practice and in any case •had little or no recognition in the philosophy of the 18th century. So the natural tendency of that philosophy, everywhere but in England, was to seek the extinction of those institutions. In England it would doubtless have done the same if it [= the tendency] had been strong enough; but because this was beyond its strength, there had to be an adjustment between the rival powers. Neither party cared about the goals of existing institutions, the work that was to be done by teachers and governors, and that was all flung overboard. The teachers and governors *did* care about the wages paid for that work, and those wages were secured to them. The existing institutions in Church and State were to be preserved inviolate, in outward appearance at least, but were required to be in practice as much a nullity as possible. The Church continued to 'rear her mitred front in

courts and palaces', but not as in the days of Hildebrand or Becket, as the champion of •arts against arms, of •the serf against the seigneur, •peace against war, or •spiritual principles and powers against the domination of animal force. Nor even (as in the days of Latimer and John Knox) as a body divinely commissioned to train the nation in a knowledge of God and obedience to his laws, whatever became of temporal principalities and powers, and whether this end might not effectively be achieved by their assistance or by trampling them under foot.

No; but the people of England liked old things, and nobody knew what might fill the place left vacant by the abolition of such a conspicuous institution; and *quieta ne movere* [= 'don't interfere with things that are settled'] was the favourite doctrine of those times. Therefore, on condition of not making too much noise about *religion* or taking it too much in earnest, the *church* was supported, even by philosophers, as a 'bulwark against fanaticism', a sedative for the religious spirit to prevent it from disturbing the harmony of society or the tranquillity of states. The clergy of the establishment thought they had a good bargain on these terms, and kept its conditions very faithfully.

Also, the State was no longer regarded (as it was in the old ideal) as a concentration of the force of all the individuals of the nation in the hands of certain of its members, to accomplish whatever could be best accomplished by systematic co-operation. It was found that the State was a bad judge of society's needs, that in reality it cared very little for them, and that when it tried anything beyond a the police against crime and b arbitration of disputes that are indispensable to social existence, its proceedings were usually prompted by the private harmful interest of some class or individual. The natural inference would have been that the constitution of the State was somehow not suited to the existing needs of

society, having indeed descended—with hardly any changes that could be avoided—from a time when the most prominent requirements of society were quite different. This conclusion, however, was shrunk from; and it required the peculiarities of very recent times, and the speculations of the Bentham school, to produce even a considerable tendency that way. The existing Constitution, and all the arrangements of existing society, continued to be applauded as the best possible. The celebrated theory of the three powers was got up, which made the excellence of our Constitution consist in doing less harm than would be done by any other form of government. Government altogether was regarded as a necessary evil, and was required to hide itself, making itself as little felt as possible. The cry of the people was not 'Help us', 'Guide us', 'Do for us the things we cannot do, and instruct us in how to do well those that we can'—and truly asking for such help from such rulers would have been a bitter jest. The cry was 'Let us alone!' Power to decide b questions of *meum* and *tuum*, and to protect society from a open violence and from some of the most dangerous modes of fraud, could not be withheld; the Government was left in possession of these functions, and the public came to expect it to confine itself to them.

### Setting the scene for Coleridge: religion

Such was the prevailing tone of English belief in temporal matters; what was it in spiritual ones? Here too a similar system of compromise had been at work. Those who pushed their philosophical speculations to the denial of the received religious belief, whether they went to the extent of unbelief or only of heterodoxy, met with little encouragement; neither religion itself nor the accepted forms of it were at all shaken by the few attacks made on them from outside.

But the philosophy of the time made itself felt as effectively in another fashion; it pushed its way *into* religion. The *a priori* arguments for a God were first dismissed. This was indeed inevitable. The internal evidences of Christianity shared nearly the same fate: if not absolutely thrown aside, they fell into the background and were little thought of. In forgetfulness of the most solemn warnings of the Author of Christianity, as well as of the Apostle who was the main diffuser of it through the world, belief in his religion was left to stand on *miracles*—a species of evidence which, according to the universal belief of the early Christians themselves, was by no means peculiar [see Glossary] to true religion; and it is melancholy to see on what frail reeds able defenders of Christianity preferred to rest, rather than on the better evidence that alone gave to their so-called evidences any value as a collateral confirmation. In the interpretation of Christianity the most obvious *bibliolatry* prevailed, that being Coleridge's term for the superstitious worship of particular texts, which persecuted Galileo and in our own day condemned the discoveries of geology. Men whose faith in Christianity rested on the literal infallibility of the sacred volume shrank in terror from the idea that the scheme of Providence could have allowed that the human opinions and mental habits of the particular writers might mix with and colour their way of conceiving and narrating the divine transactions. Yet this slavery to the letter has not only •treated as an objection to revelation every difficulty that envelops the most unimportant passage in the Bible, but has •paralysed many a well-meant effort to bring Christianity home to human experience and capacities of apprehension—through the thought that much of it had better be left *in nubibus* [= 'in a state of suspension'] because in the attempt to make the mind seize hold of it as a reality some text might be found to stand in the way. It might have been expected that this

idolatry of the words of Scripture would at least have saved its doctrines from being tampered with by human notions; but the contrary proved to be the effect; for the vague and sophistical [see Glossary] mode of interpreting texts, which was necessary to reconcile things that were plainly irreconcilable, created a habit of playing fast and loose with Scripture and finding in it or leaving out of it whatever one pleased. Hence, while Christianity was in theory and in intention accepted and submitted to unconditionally, much alacrity was in fact displayed in accommodating it to the accepted philosophy and even to the popular notions of the time. To take only one example, but such a striking one as to be *instar omnium* [= 'a prime example of the type']. If there is any one requirement of Christianity less doubtful than another, it is that of being spiritually-minded; of loving and practising good from a pure love, simply because it is good. But one of the errors of the philosophy of the age was that all virtue is self-interest; and accordingly, in the text-book adopted by the Church (in one of its universities) for instruction in moral philosophy, the reason for doing good is declared to be that God is stronger than we are and can damn us if we do not. This is no exaggeration of the views of Paley, and hardly even of the crudity of his language.

### Coleridge as a blessing

Thus on the whole England did not have the benefits (such as they were) of either the new ideas or the old. We were just sufficiently under the influence of each to render the other powerless. We had a Government that we respected too much to try to change it, but not enough to trust it with any power or look to it for any services that were not compelled. We had a Church that had ceased to fulfil the honest purposes of a church but which we made a great

point of keeping up as the pretence or simulacrum of one. We had a highly spiritual religion (which we were instructed to obey from selfish motives), and the most mechanical and worldly notions on every other subject; and we were so afraid of lacking reverence for each particular syllable of the book that contained our religion that we let its most important meanings slip through our fingers, and entertained the most grovelling conceptions of its spirit and general purposes. This was not a state of things that could recommend itself to any earnest mind. It was certain before long to call forth two sorts of men—one demanding the extinction of the institutions and creeds that had hitherto existed, the other that they be made a reality; one pressing the new doctrines to their utmost consequences, the other reasserting the best meaning and purposes of the old. The first type reached its greatest height in Bentham, the second in Coleridge.

I hold that these two sorts of men, who seem to be enemies and believe themselves to be so, are really allies. The powers they wield are opposite poles of one great force of progression. What was really hateful and contemptible was the state that preceded them, and that each in its way has been trying now for many years to improve. Each ought to hail with rejoicing the advent of the other. But most of all an enlightened Radical or Liberal ought to rejoice over such a Conservative as Coleridge. For such a Radical must know •that the Constitution and the Church of England, and the religious opinions and political maxims professed by their supporters, are not mere frauds or sheer nonsense; •that they were not at first invented and then all along maintained for the sole purpose of picking people's pockets, without aiming at—or being found conducive to—any honest end during the whole process. Nothing of which that is a sufficient account would have lasted a tenth part of five, eight, or ten centuries in the most improving period and

(during much of that period) the most improving nation in the world. These things, we can depend on it, were not always without much good in them, however little of it may now be left; and reformers ought to hail as a brother reformer the man who points out what this good is; what it is that we have a right to expect from things established—what they are bound to do for us as the justification for their being established, so that they may be recalled to it and compelled to do it, or the impossibility of their any longer doing it may be conclusively shown. What is any case for reform good for unless it has passed this test? How can we determine whether a thing is fit to exist without first considering what purposes it exists for and whether it is still capable of fulfilling them?

I do not have room here to consider Coleridge's Conservative philosophy in all its aspects, or in relation to all the quarters from which objections might be raised against it. I shall consider it in relation to Reformers, and especially to Benthamites. I would like to help them to determine whether they prefer to engage with a Conservative philosophers or with b Conservative dunces; and whether, since there *are* Tories, it would be better for them to learn their Toryism from b Lord Eldon or even Sir Robert Peel or from a Coleridge.

### **Church establishment**

Take, for instance, Coleridge's view of the grounds for a Church Establishment. He treats any institution by investigating what he terms the Idea of it, or what in common parlance would be called the principle involved in it. According to him, the idea or principle of a national church, and of the Church of England considered as a national church, is the setting aside of a portion of the land (or of a right to a portion of its produce) as a fund. For what purpose?

For the worship of God? For the performance of religious ceremonies? No; for the advancement of knowledge, and the civilisation and cultivation of the community. He does not call this fund Church-property, but ‘the nationalty’—a word coined by him to mean national property. He considers it as destined for [the following quotation from Coleridge runs to the end of the paragraph] ‘the support and maintenance of a permanent class or order, with the following duties. A certain smaller number were to remain at the fountainheads of the humanities, in cultivating and enlarging the knowledge already possessed, and in watching over the interests of physical and moral science; being likewise the instructors of such as constituted, or were to constitute, the remaining more numerous classes of the order. The members of this latter and far more numerous body were to be distributed throughout the country, so as not to leave even the smallest integral part or division without a resident guide, guardian, and instructor; the objects and final intention of the whole order being these—•to preserve the stores and to guard the treasures of past civilisation, and thus to bind the present with the past; •to perfect and add to the same, and thus to connect the present with the future; but especially •to diffuse through the whole community, and to every native entitled to its laws and rights, the quantity and quality of knowledge that was indispensable both for the understanding of those rights, and for the performance of the corresponding duties; finally, •to secure for the nation an equality (at least) with the neighbouring states in that character of general civilisation which—more than fleets, armies and revenue—is the basis for its defensive and offensive power.’

This organised body, set apart and endowed for the cultivation and diffusion of knowledge, is not in Coleridge’s view necessarily a religious corporation. [The next two paragraphs are quoted from chapter 5 of Coleridge’s *Church and State*.]

‘Religion may be an indispensable ally, but is not the essential constitutive end, of that national institute which is improperly called “the Church”, a name which in its best sense is exclusively appropriate to the Church of Christ. The *clerisy* [see Glossary] of the nation or national church, in the primary meaning and original intention of that word, comprehended the learned of all kinds, the sages and professors of the law and jurisprudence, of medicine and physic, of music, of military and civil architecture, with the mathematical disciplines as the common organ of those; in short, all the so-called liberal arts and sciences, the possession and application of which constitute the civilisation of a country, as well as the theological. The last was indeed placed at the head of all, and it was entitled to precedence. But why? Because under the name of theology or divinity were contained •the interpretation of languages, •the conservation and tradition of past events, the momentous epochs and revolutions of the race and nation, •the continuation of the records, logic, ethics, and the determination of ethical science in application to the rights and duties of men in all their various relations, social and civil; and lastly •the ground-knowledge, the *prima scientia* as it was named—philosophy, or the doctrine and discipline of ideas.

Theology formed only a part of the objects, the theologians formed only a portion of the clerks or clergy, of the national Church. The theological order deserved its precedence, but not because its members were priests whose office was to placate the invisible powers and superintend the interests that survive the grave; or as being exclusively or even principally devoted to sacrifices or temple rituals (when those occurred, they were an accident of the age, a misgrowth of ignorance and oppression, a falsification of the constitutive principle and not a constituent part of it). No; the theologians took the lead because the science of



theology was the root and the trunk of the knowledge of civilised man; because it gave unity and the circulating sap of life to all other sciences, by virtue of which alone they could be contemplated as forming collectively the living tree of knowledge. It had precedence because under the name “theology” were comprised all the main aids, instruments, and materials of national education, the *nisus formativus* [= ‘life force’] of the body politic, the shaping and informing spirit which brings out the latent powers in all the natives of the soil, training them to be citizens of the country, free subjects of the realm. And, lastly, because to divinity belong those fundamental truths that are the common groundwork of our civil and our religious duties, as indispensable to a right view of our temporal concerns as to a rational faith respecting our immortal well-being. Without celestial observations, even terrestrial charts cannot be accurately constructed.’

According to Coleridge, the nationality or national property ‘cannot rightfully—and without foul wrong to the nation never has been—alienated from its original purposes’, from the promotion of ‘a continuing and progressive civilisation’ to the benefit of individuals or to any public purpose of merely economical or material interest. But the State may withdraw the fund from its actual holders, for the better execution of its purposes. There is no sanctity attached to the means, but only to the ends. The fund is not dedicated to any particular scheme of religion, nor even to religion at all; religion comes into it only as an instrument of civilisation, along with all the other instruments. [The rest of this paragraph is quoted from chapter 6 of Coleridge’s *Church and State*.] ‘I do not assert that the proceeds from the nationality cannot be rightfully vested except in what we now mean by clergymen and the established clergy. I have everywhere implied the contrary. . . . In relation to the national church, Christianity,

i.e. the Church of Christ, is a blessed accident, a providential boon, a grace of God. . . . As the olive tree is said in its growth to fertilise the surrounding soil, to invigorate the roots of the vines in its immediate neighbourhood, and to improve the strength and flavour of the wines, such is the relation of the Christian and the national Church. But as the olive is not the same plant as the vine, or as the elm or poplar (that is, the State) with which the vine is wedded; and as the vine with its prop can exist, though in less perfection, without the olive, even so Christianity—and thus any particular scheme of theology *derived* from Christianity and supposed by its partisans to be *deduced* from it—is not an essential part of the being of the national Church, however conducive or even indispensable it may be to its well-being.’

What would Sir Robert Inglis, or Sir Robert Peel, or Mr Spooner say to such a doctrine as this? Will they thank Coleridge for this advocacy of Toryism? What would become of the three years’ debates on the Appropriation Clause, which so disgraced this country before the face of Europe? Will the ends of practical Toryism be much served by a theory under which the Royal Society might claim a part of the Church property with as much right as the bench of bishops, if science could be better promoted by endowing that body as the French Institute is endowed? a theory by which the State, in the conscientious exercise of its judgment, having decided that the Church of England does not fulfil the object for which the nationality was intended, might transfer its endowments to any other ecclesiastical body, or to any other body not ecclesiastical, which it thought to be more competent to fulfil those objects; might establish any other sect—or all sects, or no sect at all—if it should think that in the divided condition of religious opinion in this country the State can no longer with advantage attempt the complete religious instruction of its people, but must for the present

content itself with providing secular instruction and any religious teaching that all can take part in, leaving each sect to apply to its own communion that which they all agree in considering as the keystone of the arch? I believe this to be the true state of affairs in Great Britain at the present time. I am far from thinking it other than a serious evil. I entirely admit that if someone is fit to be a teacher, his view of religion will be intimately connected with his view of all the greatest things that he has to teach. Unless the teachers who give instruction on those other subjects are at liberty also to enter freely on religion, the scheme of education will be somewhat fragmentary and incoherent. But the State at present has only the option of such an imperfect scheme, or of entrusting the whole business to perhaps the most unfit body for the exclusive charge of it that could be found among persons of any intellectual attainments, namely, the established clergy as at present trained and composed. Such a body would have no chance of being selected as the exclusive administrators of the nationalty [see Glossary] on any basis except that of divine right, which is the basis openly accepted by the only other school of Conservative philosophy that is trying to raise its head in this country—that of the new Oxford theologians.

Coleridge's merit in this matter seems to me to consist in two things. **(1)** By setting in a clear light •what a national church establishment ought to be, and •what by the very fact of its existence it must be held to claim to be, he has pronounced the severest satire on •what in fact it is. There is indeed some difference between •Coleridge's church, in which the schoolmaster forms the first step in the hierarchy 'who, in due time and under condition of a faithful performance of his arduous duties, should succeed to the pastorate', and •the Church of England such as we now see. But to say *the Church* and mean only *the clergy* 'constituted the first and fundamental apostasy', Coleridge

thought. He and the thoughts that have come from him have done more than Dissenters and Radicals could have done in thrice the time to make the Church ashamed of the evil of its ways and to produce that movement of improvement from within, which has begun where it ought to begin, at the Universities and among the younger clergy, and which must proceed in step with the assault carried on from without if this sect-ridden country is ever to be really taught.

**(2)** I honour Coleridge for having rescued from the discredit in which the corruptions of the English Church had involved everything connected with it, and for having vindicated against Bentham and Adam Smith and the whole 18th century, the principle of an endowed class, for the cultivation of learning and for diffusing its results among the community. That such a class is likely to be behind the progress of knowledge instead of ahead of it is an induction [see Glossary] erroneously inferred from the peculiar circumstances of the last two centuries, in contradiction to all the rest of modern history. Though we have seen much of the abuses of endowments, we have not seen what this country might become through a proper administration of them, as I trust we shall not see what it would be without them. On this subject I am entirely at one with Coleridge, and with the other great defender of endowed establishments, Dr. Chalmers; and I regard the definitive establishment of this fundamental principle as one of the permanent benefits that political science owes to the Conservative philosophers.

### Coleridge on the constitution

Coleridge's theory of the Constitution is as worthy of notice as his theory of the Church. He declares that he never could elicit one ray of common sense from the Delolme and Blackstone doctrine of the balance of the three powers,

any more than he could from the balance of trade. But he does hold that there is an Idea of the Constitution, of which he says: ‘•Because our whole history, from Alfred onwards, demonstrates the continued influence of such an idea or ultimate aim in the minds of our forefathers, in their characters and functions as public men, both in what they resisted and what they claimed; in the institutions and forms of polity that they established and with regard to the ones against which they more or less successfully contended; •because the result has been a progressive—though not always a direct or fair—advance in the gradual realisation of the idea; and •because it is actually though not adequately represented in a corresponding system of means really existing; we are entitled to speak of the idea itself as actually existing, i.e. as a principle existing in the only way a principle can exist—in the minds and consciences of the persons whose duties it prescribes and whose rights it determines.’ This fundamental idea ‘is at the same time the final criterion by which all particular schemes of government must tried; for only here can we find the great constructive principles of our representative system—the only standard by which we can ascertain

- what are excrescences, symptoms of fever, and marks of degeneration,
- what are native growths, or changes naturally attendant on the progressive development of the original germ, symptoms of immaturity perhaps but not of disease, and
- what are changes in the growth due to qualities of the soil and surrounding elements, qualities that are defective or faulty but cannot be remedied, or only very slowly.’

Of these principles he gives the following account: ‘It is the chief of many blessings derived from the insular character

and circumstances of our country that our social institutions have formed themselves out of *our* needs and interests; that long and fierce as the birth-struggle and growing pains have been, the antagonist powers have been of our own system, and have been allowed to work out their final balance with less disturbance from external forces than was possible in the Continental States. . . . Now, in every country of civilised men—i.e. every country acknowledging the rights of property, and by means of determined boundaries and common laws united into one people or nation—the two antagonist powers or opposite interests of the State, containing all other State interests, are those of **permanence** and of **progression**.’

The interest of permanence, or the Conservative interest, he considers to be naturally connected with the land and with landed property. This doctrine, which I think is false as a universal principle, is true of England and of all countries where landed property is accumulated in large masses. He says: ‘On the other hand, •the progression of a State in the arts and comforts of life, in the diffusion of the information and knowledge useful or necessary for all, in short, •all advances in civilisation and the rights and privileges of citizens, are especially connected with and derived from four classes—the mercantile, the manufacturing, the distributive, and the professional. I will designate these four classes by the name Personal Interest, as the exponent of all movable and personal possessions—including skill and acquired knowledge (the moral and intellectual stock in trade of the professional man and the artist—as well as the raw materials and the means of elaborating, transporting, and distributing them.’

The interest of **permanence**, then, is provided for by a parliamentary representation of the landed proprietors; that of **progression** by a representation of personal property and of intellectual acquirement; and while one branch of

the Legislature, the Peerage, is essentially given over to the former, he considers it a part of the general theory *and* of the actual English constitution that the representatives of the latter should form 'the clear and effective majority of the Lower House'; or if not, that at least the added influence of public opinion should enable them to exercise an effective preponderance there. That 'the very weight intended for the effective counterpoise of the great landholders' has 'in the course of events been shifted into the opposite scale'; that the members for the towns 'now constitute a large proportion of the political power and influence of the very class of men whose personal greed and whose partial views of the landed interest at large they were meant to keep in check'—these things he acknowledges, and only suggests a doubt whether roads, canals, machinery, the press, and other influences favourable to the popular side do not constitute an equivalent force to make up for the deficiency.

How much better Coleridge is as a Parliamentary Reformer than Lord John Russell or any Whig who stickles for maintaining this unconstitutional omnipotence of the landed interest! If these became the principles of Tories, we should not wait long for further reform, even in our organic institutions. It is true that Coleridge disapproved of the Reform Bill, or rather of the principle or no-principle on which it was supported. He saw in it (as we may surmise) the dangers of a change amounting almost to a revolution, without any real tendency to remove the defects in the machine that alone could justify such an extensive change. And all parties seem to be now agreed that this is nearly a true view of the matter. The Reform Bill was not calculated to improve significantly the general composition of the Legislature. The good it has done, which is considerable, consists chiefly in this: being such a great change, it has weakened the superstitious feeling against great changes.

Any good contrary to the selfish interest of the dominant class is still only to be achieved through a long and arduous struggle; but big improvements that do not threaten that class's social importance or its income are no longer resisted, as they once were, just because of their size—because of the very benefit that they promised. Witness the speedy passing of the Poor Law Amendment and the Penny Postage Acts.

Meanwhile, though Coleridge's theory is a mere beginning, not amounting to the first lines of a political philosophy, has the age produced any other theory of government that can stand a comparison with it as to its first principles? Consider for example the Benthamic theory. The principle of this may be said to be that

since the general interest is the object of government, a complete control over the government ought to be given to those whose interest is identical with the general interest.

The authors and propounders of this theory were men of extraordinary intellectual powers, and most of what they meant by it is true and important. But considered as the foundation of a science, it would be hard to find among theories produced by philosophers one less like a philosophical theory, or in the works of analytical minds anything more entirely unanalytical. What can a philosopher make of such complex notions as 'interest' and 'general interest' without breaking them down into the elements of which they are composed? If by men's 'interest' is meant what would appear such to a calculating bystander, judging what would be good for a man during his whole life and taking little or no account of the gratification of his present passions, his pride, his envy, his vanity, his cupidity, his love of pleasure, his love of ease, it may be questioned whether the interest of an aristocracy, and still more that of a monarch, would not be as accordant with the general 'interest' in *this* sense as

that of either the middle or the poorer classes; and if men's interest, on this understanding of it, usually governed their conduct, absolute monarchy would probably be the best form of government. But since men usually do what they like, often being perfectly aware that it is not for their ultimate interest, still more often that it is not for the interest of their posterity—and when they do believe that the object they are seeking is permanently good for them, almost always overrating its value—it is necessary to consider not who are they whose *permanent interest* but who are they whose *immediate interests and habitual feelings* are likely to square best with the goal we seek to achieve. And as that goal (the general good) is a very complex state of things, comprising as its component elements many requisites that are not of the same nature or attainable by the same means, political philosophy must begin by a classification of these elements, in order to distinguish •those that go naturally together (so that the provision made for one will suffice for the rest) from •those that are ordinarily in a state of antagonism, or at least of separation, and require to be provided for separately. When this preliminary classification had been done, things in a perfect government would be so organised that corresponding to •each of the great interests of society there would be •a branch or integral part of the governing body so constituted that—in the view of philosophers and also in its own view—its strongest interests involved maintaining that one of the ends of society that it is intended to be the guardian of. This, I say, is the thing to be aimed at, the ideal of perfection in a political constitution. Not that any more than a limited approach to it could possibly be made in practice. A government must be composed out of the elements already existing in society, and the distribution of power in the constitution cannot vary much or long from the distribution of it in society itself. But wherever the circumstances of society allow any

choice, wherever wisdom and planning are at all available, this, I conceive, is the principle of guidance; and whatever anywhere exists is imperfect and a failure just so far as it recedes from this.

Such a philosophy of government, I need hardly say, is in its infancy: the first step to it, the classification of the needs of society, has not been made. Bentham in his *Principles of Civil Law* has given a specimen, very useful for many other purposes but not available (or intended to be so) as a basis for a theory of representation. For that particular purpose I have seen nothing comparable as far as it goes, despite its obvious insufficiency, to Coleridge's division of the interests of society into the two opposing interests of Permanence and Progression. The Continental philosophers have arrived at the same division by a different path; and this is probably about as far as the science of political institutions has yet reached.

### Coleridge's views on government

In the details of Coleridge's political opinions there is much good, and much that is questionable, or worse. In political economy, especially, he writes like an arrant driveller, and it would have been well for his reputation if he had never meddled with the subject. But this department of knowledge can now take care of itself. On other points we meet with far-reaching remarks, and a tone of general feeling sufficient to make a Tory's hair stand on end. Thus, in the work from which I have most quoted, he calls the State policy of the last half-century 'a Cyclops with one eye, and that in the back of the head'—its measures 'either a series of anachronisms, or a truckling to events instead of the science that should command them'. He styles the great Commonwealthsmen 'the stars of that narrow interspace of blue sky between the

black clouds of the reigns of Charles I and Charles II.' The *Literary Remains* are full of disparaging remarks on many of the heroes of Toryism and Church-of-Englandism. . . . As a specimen of his practical views, I have mentioned his recommendation that the parochial clergy should begin by being schoolmasters. He urges 'a different division and subdivision of the kingdom' instead of 'the present barbarism, which forms a much bigger obstacle to the improvement of the country than men are generally aware'. But I must confine myself to instances in which he has helped to bring forward great principles, either implied in the old English opinions and institutions or at least opposed to the new tendencies.

For example, he is at issue with the *let alone* doctrine, or the theory that governments can do no better than to do nothing; a doctrine generated by the manifest selfishness and incompetence of modern European governments, but of which as a general theory we may now be permitted to say that one half of it is true and the other half false. All who are on a level with their age now readily admit that government ought not to *forbid* men to publish their opinions, pursue their employments, or buy and sell their goods, in whatever place or manner they think the most advantageous. Beyond suppressing force and fraud, governments can seldom try to chain up the free agency of individuals without doing more harm than good. But does it follow from this that government cannot exercise a free agency of its own?—that it cannot beneficially employ its powers, its means of information, and its pecuniary resources (far greater than those of any other association or of any individual) in promoting the public welfare by a thousand means that individuals would never think of, would not have sufficient motives to attempt or sufficient powers to accomplish? To take just one example: a State ought to be considered as a great benefit society, or

mutual insurance company, for helping (under the necessary regulations for preventing abuse) the large proportion of its members who cannot help themselves.

Coleridge says:

'Let us suppose that the negative ends of a State are already attained—namely, its own safety by means of its own strength, and the protection of person and property for all its members—there will then remain its positive goals: **(1)** To make the means of subsistence easier for each individual, **(2)** To give each of its members the hope of bettering his own condition or that of his children. **(3)** The development of those faculties that are essential to his humanity, i.e. to his rational and moral being.'

In regard to the first two goals, he of course does not mean that they can be accomplished merely by making laws to that effect; or that—as is maintained by wild doctrines now afloat—it is the fault of the government if not everyone has enough to eat and drink. He means that government can do something directly, and very much indirectly, to promote even the physical comfort of the people; and that if, besides making a proper use of its own powers it would exert itself to teach the people what is in theirs, poverty would soon disappear from the face of the earth.

Perhaps, however, Coleridge's greatest service to politics in his capacity of a Conservative philosopher, though its fruits are mostly yet to come, is in reviving the idea of a *trust inherent in landed property*. The land—the gift of nature, everyone's source of subsistence, the foundation of everything that influences our physical well-being—cannot be considered a subject of property [see Glossary], in the same absolute sense in which men are regarded as owners of that in which no-one has any interest but themselves—that which they have actually called into existence by their own bodily

exertion. As Coleridge points out, such a notion [i.e. the notion that land can be *owned*] is an entirely modern one:

'The very idea of individual or private *property*, in our present meaning of the term and according to the current notion of the right to it, was originally confined to movable things; and the more movable, the more qualified to count as property.'

By the early institutions of Europe, property in land was a public function, created for certain public purposes and held on condition of their fulfilment; and I predict that it will again come to be considered in that way, with modifications suited to modern society. In the present age, when everything is called in question, and when the basis for private property itself needs to be defended against plausible and persuasive sophisms, one may easily see the danger of mixing up what is not really tenable with what is—and see the impossibility of giving to an individual an absolute right to unrestricted control—a *jus utendi et abutendi* [= a right to use or waste]—over an unlimited quantity of the mere raw material of the globe, to which every other person could originally make out as good a *natural* title as himself. It will certainly not be much longer tolerated that agriculture should be carried on (as Coleridge puts it) on the same principles as those of trade:

- that a gentleman should regard his estate as a merchant his cargo, or a shopkeeper his stock,
- that he should be allowed to deal with it as if it existed only to yield rent to him, not food to those whose hands till it, and
- should have a right—one possessing all the sacredness of property—to turn them out by hundreds and make them perish on the high road, as has been done before now by Irish landlords.

It will soon be thought that a system of property in land that has brought things to this pass has existed long enough.

I will not be suspected (I hope) of recommending a general confiscation of landed possessions, or of depriving anyone without compensation of anything the law gives him. But I say that •when the State allows anyone to exercise ownership over more land than suffices to provide, through his own labour, a living for himself and his family, it gives him *power over other human beings*—power affecting them in their most vital interests—and that •no notion of private property can block the State's inherent right to require that the power it has so given shall not be abused. I say also that by giving the person this direct power over so large a portion of the community, the State necessarily gives him indirect power over all the rest; and it is the duty of the State to place this too under proper control. Further, the tenure of land, the various rights connected with it, and the system on which its cultivation is carried on, are points of the utmost importance to the economic *and* the moral well-being of the whole community. And the State fails in one of its highest obligations unless it attends to these matters—unless it exercises its whole power to ensure that the manner in which land is held, how (and how much) it is divided, and every other peculiarity that influences the mode of its cultivation, shall be the most favourable possible for making the best use of the land; for drawing the greatest benefit from its productive resources, for securing the happiest existence to those employed on it, and for setting the greatest number of workers free to employ their labour for the benefit of the community in other ways. I believe that before long these opinions will become universal throughout Europe. And I gratefully acknowledge that the first among us who has given the sanction of philosophy to so great a reform in the popular and current notions is a Conservative philosopher.

### Coleridge on morality and religion

Of Coleridge as a moral and religious philosopher (the role he presents most prominently in his main works) there is no room here for me to speak more than generally, nor would it be expedient for me to do so. On both subjects, few men have ever combined so much earnestness with so little narrowness and such an unsectarian spirit. He says:

‘By the lines we have drawn in order to exclude the conceptions of others, we have imprisoned our own. I have found that most sects are right in a good part of what they affirm, but not so much in what they deny.  
[That sentence is translated from Coleridge’s French.]

That almost all sects in philosophy and in religion are right in the positive part of their tenets, though commonly wrong in the negative, is a doctrine he professes as strongly as does the eclectic school in France. He holds almost all errors to be ‘truths misunderstood’, ‘half-truths taken as the whole’, though more rather than less dangerous on that account. Both the theory and practice of enlightened tolerance in matters of opinion might be exhibited in extracts from his writings more copiously than in those of any other writer I know; though there are a few (a mere *few*) exceptions to his own practice of it. In the theory of ethics, he contends against the doctrine of general consequences, and holds that *for man* ‘to obey the simple unconditional commandment of avoiding any act that implies a self-contradiction’—so to act as to ‘be able, without involving any contradiction, to will that the maxim of your conduct should be the law of all intelligent beings—is the one universal and sufficient principle and guide of morality.’ Yet even a utilitarian can have little complaint against a philosopher who lays it down that ‘the outward object of virtue’ is ‘the greatest producible sum of happiness of all men’, and that ‘happiness in its

proper sense is but the continuity and sum-total of the pleasure that is allotted or happens to a man.’

But his greatest aim was to bring Religion into harmony with Philosophy. He laboured incessantly to establish that ‘the Christian faith—in which’, he says, ‘I include every article of belief and doctrine professed by the first reformers in common’—is not only divine truth but also ‘the perfection of Human Intelligence’.

According to him, philosophy can •prove everything that Christianity has revealed, though there is much that it could never have •discovered; human reason, once strengthened by Christianity, can evolve all the Christian doctrines from its own sources. Moreover, ‘if unbelief is not to overspread England as well as France’, the Scripture and every passage in it must be submitted to this test; because ‘the compatibility of a document with the conclusions of self-evident reason, and with the laws of conscience, is a requirement for its being regarded as having been revealed by God’; and this, he says, is not a philosophical novelty but a principle ‘clearly laid down both by Moses and St. Paul’. He thus goes quite as far as the Unitarians in making man’s reason and moral feelings a test of revelation; but differs *toto coelo* from them in their rejection of its mysteries, which he regards as the highest philosophic truths. He jeers at ‘the Christian to whom, after a long profession of Christianity, the mysteries remain as much mysteries as before’.

These opinions are not likely to be popular in the religious world, and Coleridge knew it: ‘I quite calculate’, said he once, ‘on my being some day held in worse repute by many Christians than the “Unitarians” and even “Unbelievers”’. This must be suffered by everyone who loves the truth for its own sake beyond all other things.’ For my part, I am not bound to defend him; and I must admit that in his attempt to arrive at theology by way of philosophy I see



much straining, and most often (it appears to me) total failure. The question, however, is not whether Coleridge's attempts are successful, but whether it is desirable that such attempts should be made. Whatever some religious people may think, philosophy will and must go on, always trying to understand whatever can be made understandable; and, whatever some philosophers may think, there is little prospect at present that philosophy will replace religion, or that any philosophy will be speedily accepted in this country unless it is thought not only to be consistent with Christianity but even to provide support to it. What is the use, then, of treating with contempt the idea of a religious philosophy? Religious philosophies are among the things to be looked for, and our main hope ought to be that they will fulfil the conditions of a *philosophy*—the very foremost of which is unrestricted freedom of thought. No philosophy is possible where fear of consequences is a stronger force than love of truth; where speculation is paralysed, either by •the belief that conclusions honestly arrived at will be punished (by a just and good Being) with eternal damnation, or by •seeing in every text of Scripture a foregone conclusion with which the results of inquiry must be made to square, at any expense of sophistry and self-deception.

Coleridge's mind was perfectly free from both these withering influences that have often made the acutest intellects exhibit specimens of obliquity and imbecility [= 'dishonesty and incompetence'] in their theological speculations that have made them the pity of subsequent generations. Faith—the faith that is placed among religious duties—was in his view a state of the will and of the affections, not of the understanding. According to him, heresy, in 'the literal sense and scriptural import of the word', is 'wilful error, or belief originating in some perversion of the **will**'; he says, therefore, that there may be orthodox heretics, since indifference to truth may

as well be shown on the right side of the question as on the wrong; and he denounces in strong language the contrary doctrine of the 'pseudo-Athanasius', who 'interprets Catholic faith by belief', an act of the **understanding** alone. The 'true Lutheran doctrine', he says, is that 'truth as a mere conviction of the understanding will not save, nor will error condemn. To love truth sincerely is spiritually to have truth; and an error becomes a personal error not by its aberration from logic or history but so far as its causes are in the heart or can be traced back to some previous unchristian wish or habit.' 'The unmistakable passions of a factionary and a schismatic, the ostentatious display, the ambitious and dishonest arts of a sect-founder, must be added to the false doctrine before the heresy makes the man a heretic.'

Coleridge took of the authority of the Scriptures as a preservative against the other error, so fatal to the unshackled exercise of reason on the greatest questions. He drew the strongest distinction between •the inspiration that he acknowledged in the various writers and •a dictation by the Almighty of every word they wrote. He again and again asserts that 'the notion of the absolute truth and divinity of every syllable of the text of the Old and New Testament as we have it' is

- unsupported by the Scripture itself, is
- one of those superstitions in which 'there is a heart of unbelief', and is
- if possible, still more extravagant' than the doctrine of Papal infallibility;

and he declares that the very same arguments are used for both doctrines. God, he believes, informed the minds of the writers with the truths he meant to reveal, and left the rest to their human faculties. He pleaded most earnestly, says his nephew and editor, for this liberty of criticism with respect to the Scriptures, as

‘the only middle path of safety and peace between •a godless disregard of the unique and transcendent character of the Bible, taken generally, and •the scheme of interpretation. . . .that wildly arrays our faith in opposition to our reason, and teaches the sacrifice of the latter to the former. He threw up his hands in dismay at the language of some of our modern divines on this point, as if. . . .the Father of lights could require from the only one of his creatures whom he had endowed with reason the sacrifice of fools! Of the aweless doctrine that God might, if he had so pleased, have •given to man a religion that human intelligence would not find to be rational, and •demanded faith in it, Coleridge’s whole middle and later life was one deep and solemn denial.’

He bewails ‘bibliolatry’ as the pervading error of modern Protestant divinity, and the great stumbling-block of Christianity, and exclaims, ‘O might I live long enough to utter all my meditations on this most concerning point, in what sense the Bible may be called the word of God, and how and under what conditions the unity of the Spirit can be seen through the letter, which, read as the letter merely, is the word of some pious but fallible and imperfect man.’ It is known that he did live to write down these meditations; and it is devoutly to be hoped that such important speculations will one day be given to the world.

Theological discussion is beyond my province, and it is not for me here to judge these opinions of Coleridge; but it is clear enough that they are not the opinions of a bigot, or of someone whom Liberals might fear will illiberalise the minds of the rising generation of Tories and High Churchmen. I think they should rather fear him as being vastly *too* liberal! And yet now—when the most orthodox divines. . . .find it necessary •to explain away the obvious sense of the whole first

chapter of Genesis or, failing that, •to consent to disbelieve it provisionally in the hope that there may yet be discovered a sense in which it can be believed—one would think the time gone by for expecting to learn from the Bible what it never could have been intended to communicate, and to find in all its statements a literal truth neither necessary nor conducive to what the book itself says are the goals of revelation. Such at least was Coleridge’s opinion; and whatever influence such an opinion may have over Conservatives, it cannot do other than make them less bigots and better philosophers.

### Conclusion

But I must close this long essay—long in itself though short in its relation to its subject and to the multitude of topics involved in it. I do not claim to have given a sufficient account of Coleridge; but I hope I have proved to some who were not before aware of it that in him and in the school to which he belongs there is something that they would do well to know more about. I may have done something to show that a Tory philosopher cannot be wholly a Tory, but must often be a better Liberal than Liberals themselves; while he is the natural means of rescuing from oblivion truths that Tories have forgotten and the prevailing schools of Liberalism never knew.

And even if a Conservative philosophy were an absurdity, it is well calculated to drive out a hundred absurdities worse than itself. Let no-one think that it is *nothing* to accustom people to give a reason for their opinion, however untenable the opinion, however insufficient the reason. A person accustomed to submit his •fundamental tenets to the test of reason will be more open to the dictates of reason on every •other point. Not from him shall we have to apprehend the owl-like dread of light, the drudge-like aversion to change,

that were the characteristics of the old unreasoning race of bigots. A man accustomed to contemplate the fair side of Toryism (the side that every attempt at a philosophy of it must bring to view), and to defend the existing system by the display of its capabilities as an engine of public good—such a man, when he comes to administer the system, will be more anxious than another person to make something of those capacities, to bring the fact a little nearer to plausible theory. ‘Lord, enlighten thou our enemies’ should be the prayer of every true Reformer; sharpen their wits, give acuteness to their perceptions, and consecutiveness and clearness to their reasoning powers. We are in danger from their folly, not from their wisdom; what fills us with apprehension is not their strength but their weakness.

For myself, I am not so blinded by my particular opinions as to be ignorant that in this and in every other country of Europe the great mass of the owners of large property, and of all the classes intimately connected with the owners

of large property, are and must be expected to be in the main Conservative. To suppose that such a mighty body can be without immense influence in the commonwealth, or to lay plans for making great spiritual or temporal changes in which they are left out of the question, would be the height of absurdity. Let those who desire such changes ask themselves if they are content that these classes should be permanently banded against them; and what progress they expect to make, or by what means, unless a process of preparation goes on in the minds of these very classes—not by the impracticable method of converting them from Conservatives into Liberals, but by their being led to adopt one liberal opinion after another, as a part of Conservatism itself. The first step towards this is to inspire them with a desire to systematise and rationalise their own actual creed; and the feeblest attempt to do this has an intrinsic value; far more, then, one that has so much moral goodness and true insight in it as does the philosophy of Coleridge.