Coleridge's Worries about the Afterlife: Doubts, Circularities, and Imaginings

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In 1799 in letters to his wife and to Thomas Poole, Coleridge grapples with the meaning of the death of his second son, Berkeley, nine months old. Because of slow mail through the frozen Elbe River in Hamburg, his meditations arrive too late to communicate solace to the grieving mother.[1] He tries to give her hope that Death cannot stop the brief life because the baby's consciousness, "a flash of light—a summer gust," will continue in the afterlife:

> I will not believe that it ceases—in this moving stirring and harmonious Universe I *cannot* believe it!…. But the living God is every where, & works every where—and where is there room for Death?—To look back on the life of my Baby, how short it seems! But consider it referently to non-existence, and what a manifold and majestic Thing does it not become?[2]

In this letter there is no "room for Death." By contrast, in the less declamatory letter about the meaning of his baby's death that he wrote to Thomas Poole even before writing to his wife, "this strange, strange, strange Scene-shifter, Death! … giddies one with insecurity, & so unsubstantiates the living Things that one has grasped and handled!" (*CL* 1, 274; letter 274).

In these two responses to extinction, written from a distance, Coleridge expresses a bifurcated expectation for the baby's future. The letter to his wife is certain that Berkeley's soul will live on after death; the letter to Poole teeters on the brink of doubt. The fact of death "giddies one with insecurity."

Readers of Coleridge hold extremely divergent views on whether he worried about an afterlife or not. Most readers argue that the question of the immortality of the soul does not worry Coleridge because it is built in to the Christian promise. J. Robert Barth asserts that Coleridge believed in "the ultimate pledge of man's future life: Jesus Christ, who himself conquered death so that all men might be saved from death." Anthony J. Harding states that Coleridge had a "feeling of absolute certainty that human beings must continue to enjoy some form of existence after the death of the body." Ronald Wendling reassures his readers that "Coleridge was never seriously disturbed by infidelity." John Beer concludes that Coleridge "wrote little on the question of immortality—mainly, perhaps, because he never really questioned its validity." Suzanne Webster delineates a continuum between the "pre-mortem" and "post-mortem" person in Coleridge's late notebooks assuring a continuity

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1 Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (New York: Viking, 1989), 222.

2 *Collected Letters*, ed. E.L. Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956-71), 1, 274-5, letter 275.

of the soul into a future life.[3]

Almost alone, however, Thomas McFarland believes that Coleridge's faith in a future life was not easy. He declares that Coleridge's fear of going nowhere after death motivates his *Opus Maximum*: "the question of immortality was the originating problem …and Coleridge's intensely personal need for 'immortal happiness' was its existential motive."[4] McFarland sees the question of immortality as urgent for Coleridge, contributing to personal anxiety, and undermining the complacency about the afterlife that is claimed for him by most readers. Some prose texts, a poem, and scattered arguments support McFarland's isolated position. These speculations, presented here in three sections, suggest that Coleridge was not always complacent about his future life.

1. Doubts

That he did not take a future life for granted is suggested by a statement in his philosophical lectures of 1818-19, written when he was 47: "The only argument that I believe ever really disturbs men of sincere and sober minds is that which is derived from the seeming truth of a decay of the mind with the body."[5] This assertion has at least two difficult cruxes: the word "seeming" and the word "mind." At the body's death does the mind only "seem" to "decay" or does it actually do so? Might it continue in a living state disconnected from the body? In the case of the word "mind," does Coleridge include spirit and soul in this term or does he mean only the intellect? The statement asserts that the prospect of some form of a severance between body and mind is exceedingly disturbing to any thinking person. At age 47, with an accumulation of writings on religious experience behind him, this problem is the only one that still disturbs him. From early to late he does not want to be a clod of the valley: "Have I moved and loved and reasoned and all this that I may at last be compressed into a *Clod* of the valley?" he asks in 1795. In January, 1834, six months before his death, his poem "E Coelo Descendit" begs that he not become a "Vain sister of the worm,—life, death, soul, clod—."[6] This earthy monosyllable—'clod, clod'—like inexorably approaching footsteps, seems so powerful that it abolishes the value of his life's activity. For him the future of his spirit or soul is vital in establishing the meaning of the life he lives while he

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[3] J. Robert Barth, S. J. *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), 188; Anthony John Harding, "Coleridge, the Afterlife, and the Meaning of 'Hades,'" SP XCVI, 2 (Spring, 1999), 204-22, 205; Ronald Wendling, *Coleridge's Progress to Christianity: Experience and Authority in Religious Faith* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1995), 20; Suzanne E.. Webster, *Body and Soul in Coleridge's Notebooks, 1827-1834: What is Life?* (Basingstoke: Plagrave, 2010); John Beer, ed., *On Religion and Psychology* in *Coleridge's Writings*, ed. John Beer (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 232.

[4] Prolegomena to *Opus Maximum*, ed. Thomas McFarland and Nicholas Halmi (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002), cxi.

[5] *Lectures 1818-1819 On the History of Philosophy*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson. Vol. 8. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor* (Bolingen, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002) , 1, p. 581. .

[6] *Lectures 1795*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Man (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), 349; "E Coelo Descendit" *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C.C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001) 2, p. 1154, poem 700, l.9.

awaits its end. He positions the question at the center of any assessment of why he is alive.

The question arises in off-hand remarks and in serious research. A whimsical note from 1815-16 points to a desire for physical proof that a future life exists:

> If a man could pass thro' Paradise in a Dream, & have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his Soul had really been there, & found that flower in his hand when he awoke—Aye! And what then? [7]

This note imagines that a voyage to paradise occurred once, that the voyager received a sensuously registered memento, and that he held onto it through his re-entry into life. If these three conditions happened once, they might conceivably all happen again. The note ends with an open-ended question with many possible meanings: "Aye! And what then?" Would a palpable flower prove its heavenly provenance? Who would believe it? How would the dreamer attest to the truth of his dream? How would his listener believe that the flower and the dream were connected? Even such a physical proof would not be decisive.

At times Coleridge's search for certainty verges on panic. One seemingly simple text from after 1816 draws from his deep knowledge of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* where Kant argues that "the highest good is practically possible only on the supposition of the immortality of the soul."[8] Thinking about the necessity of such a belief to progress as moral beings, Coleridge cannot stop the workings of his skeptical brain. A brief note, found among his papers at Highgate, lists "the four Convictions natural to Man." Here are the four: "1 Duty. 2. Right. 3. Immortality. 4. God." These convictions could hardly seem simpler. And yet, within a few seconds of scrutiny Coleridge chips away at their certainty. He wonders if the wild boy of Aveyron would feel such convictions spontaneously, or only a "Man" would feel it, or a "Man" more narrowly defined as someone who holds these convictions. He wonders whether they are innate, whether they are conditioned by family or imposed by the state; whether each is a mere "*idea* of existence," or has "essential Existence," is a thought or has substance apart from being thought about. He interrogates the very notion of forming a conviction: "what compels me to form it?"[9] (*SWF* 1, 411). By the end of the paragraph none of the convictions, including the third that we are immortal, seems so "natural," even before we start unpacking the many meanings of the word "natural." If immortality is a conviction "natural" to man, this naturalness is subject to the vagaries of nurture, culture, ideology, and phenomenology, while Coleridge's skeptical

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[7] *Notebooks*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, M. Christensen, and A. J. Harding (London: Routledge, 1957-2002), entry 4287.

[8] Immanuel Kant, trans. Lewis White Beck *Critique of Practical Reason*, 2, 2, 4 (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill Library, 1956), p. 127.

[9] *Shorter Works and Fragments*, ed. H.J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995) 1, 411.

brain intercepts the certainty at every corner. This brief capsule of his self-cancelling method will apply to his final notebooks as well.

Coleridge's inquiries about the afterlife weave through many topics in these notebooks when he faces the end of his own physical life. If ever he is going to establish a position and rest assured, it must be now, aged 60, in these investigations. Yet some evidence suggests that no such serenity prevails. Volume five of the *Notebooks* records among many topics Coleridge's deliberate combing of the Old Testament for testimony to his hopes of a future life. Curiously, the very act of seeking reassurance in the Old Testament indicates a high degree of uncertainty, since Christianity seeks to correct exactly this notorious absence of hope among the Hebrew fathers. Why look for help from them?

In these late commentaries Coleridge takes a rational view of the early myths and tribal customs of the Hebrew peoples. He reads Genesis as a literary work with layers of allegorical meaning, admiring the "symbolic or glyphic character of the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Genesis" (*CN* 5, 6129). These first chapters can be read allegorically as a universal development of "*Humanity*," a "Moral Creation" and "the institutions arising out of it;" they show "the spiritual process of the Fall" and what he wonderfully calls "the *Centaurization* of Man." Reading the whole as "symbolic or allegorical," he is curious about the nature of Prediluvian Men, early giants destroyed by the deluge (6130), alluding to George Cuvier's discovery of successive catastrophes in the development of the earth's history. He imagines that Adam's rib is an allegory of marriage; he suspects that Cain and Abel may be tribes rather than individuals; he wonders why in Sodom "so strange and temptationless a vice … prevailed in a whole community?" (6159). He generously reads the story of the daughters of Lot in "the context of a dread of Barrenness" (6164). He takes an easy view of intermarriage and concubinage as appropriate for the historical circumstances. He admits that he cries 'ready to break my heart about poor Esau," lamenting the "venturesome and imperious" Rebecca and the "cunning calculator and bargain driver" Jacob, in a pastoral and patriarchal age like the Homeric one where a certain "selfish or even dishonest Cunning was admired" (6182, 6185, 6186), shocking to later ideas of "heroic virtue." Meditating on Jacob, he develops his famous wisdom about the man as "an under-song" in every woman, and the woman as "a translucent Under-tint" in every man (6197). Throughout he shows a liberty in interpretation, a scientific, anthropological interest in connecting Hebrew customs with Greek, Celtic, and Native American ones (6187), an openness to feel for the stories of the ancient Hebrews as if they were living contemporaries or passionate fictions. He is not bound to a fundamentalist belief in the literal truth of these narratives but sees them as manifestations of a developing culture. His notes reflect the higher criticism as they seek a historical context for the prophets' rages and prognoses.

However, these contemplative notes taken in his quiet study also allow for the eruption of his day to day moments of anguish. For example, in musing to

himself that "Life is Love, communicative out-pouring Love," he abruptly darkens: "But the great mistake is, that the Soul cannot continue to be without *Life*—for if so, with what propriety can the portion of the reprobate Soul be called Death? What if the natural Life have two possible terminations—true Being, & the falling back into the dark Will?" (May, 1827; 5505).

Coleridge's term "*Centaurization*" indicates the reversal from the soul leading the body to the body leading the soul. But he adds something unexpected:

> Then first did Man's Body become opake & turbid—before then the transparent shrine of his substantial Being/ the Soul was the Man—and the Soul of the Man mere Words… that had no meaning from the absence of any conscious Antithetic to Soul" (6133).

This sentence suggests that before the fall the human being was pure Soul, even a verbal concept of the Soul, with no substance by which the Soul could realize itself in opposition or antithesis. The body, conscious only of its naked self, signals the loss of our real human nature:

> Gleams? The Death of the Man is not = the extinction of all Being in him; but a Descent into a lower Being—a demersion and suffocation of his proper Humanity—the loss of the Divine Idea, the Image of God, which constituted it (6134).

He is caught up by the vision of the "demersion" of the human form, the "suffocation" of what is human strangled or swallowed in the body (6134), the celestial body absorbed by the terrestrial (5823), Daphne fixed in a tree or a ball of soil.[10] What is this body that with the first disobedience becomes conscious of itself and drags man down? And down where? Anthony Harding has noted the Manicheanism of some of these later speculations (Harding, 210). Surely Coleridge's metaphors for the body—"a moveable Dungeon with Windows and Sound-holes," "a Sheath"—suggest its alienation (5671). Other metaphors render soul and body almost identical: is the soul made of "the same stuff, and the same pattern" as the body, "only woven *thinner!*—a sort of Body-*lining*?" (5291; 1825-6). His phrase for materializing images of the soul is "*a sort of celestial poultry*,"[11] a metaphor tossed off in conversation with friends that mocks literal minded beliefs in an afterlife.

With the "Dissolution of the Body" he wonders about the "survival of a Soul?" (5822). Even about the most famous living person to ascend from (or with, depending on one's doctrine) the body, Coleridge questions the "infallibility of the gospels" (6031). He wonders if Jesus was completely dead:

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[10] Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* trans. Mary M. Innes (London: Penguin, 1955), 41-44.

[11] As recorded by Thomas Hood from 1830, in *Coleridge the Talker: A Series of Contemporary Descriptions and Comments,* ed. Richard W. Armour and Raymond F. Howes (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1969), p. 264.

how can we prove his "utter disanimation" and then his resurrection from the grave (6031). Coleridge recognizes that having grown up in a Christian culture he has taken for granted a belief in a future state. In other cultures such expectations may not be so common. Ezekiel, for example, was "born, bred, and naturalized in a different dispensation." What did Ezekiel mean by "the terms *death* and *die*"? Coleridge thinks it is "almost impossible" that he meant "the mere giving up of Breath, followed up by the decomposition of the visible Body . . . Yet, on the other hand, if spiritual Death, and the fruition of a higher Life by a surviving Soul *were* intended, it does seem strange that not one image, or distinctive phrase, should have been introduced" (5682; Dec. 6, 1827). He hopes that Ezekiel meant that there was life beyond decomposition, but he can't find him saying so.

His quest through the Old Testament for hints, gleams, guidance, even some sort of proof that the ancient Hebrews believed in an afterlife is balked. In Jan. 1828, he is forced to write in large capital letters: "THE GREAT PROBLEM." The caps are extremely large in his range of typography, indicating their importance. This problem is: "the Absence—or *all but* the entire absence—of passages that directly and perceptively assert the survival of human Consciousness after the dissolution of the Sensible Body; and the infrequency of such as imply or refer to the same as an article of faith" (5732). The ancient Hebrews have introduced death, the body, consciousness, conscience, and shame, but have given poor fallen humanity only lukewarm and infrequent hints that there may be life beyond embodiment. Although ingenious Christian Fathers read these stories to prefigure the promise in Christ's ascension, such adumbrations are retroactive rereadings not in themselves reassuring to hope in future continuity. This lack may show the inadequacy of Hebrew scriptures to address this issue, as Webster argues (46-8), but it is also personally disturbing. His research project has come to a dead end: "[A] wretched whisper came" (5689), he notes, reiterating the doubts that he voiced thirty years before in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

Interspersed with his commentary on the Old Testament texts are queries about the details of the soul's ascension, if it occurs. Despite a faith that may have been inculcated since infancy (5682), he suffers from what he calls the "most profound yet the most obscure & difficult of all problems—viz., what, whence, how of Souls" (5661). Often the words "What if?" signal such a question. He asks fiercely, "How know you, on what grounds do you presume, that on rushing from *thy* body you are not falling from the gridiron into the fire?" (6649). A note that opens simply, like the text about convictions natural to man that I began with, sometimes fizzles into despair as he dissects it further:

> The simple foundation—namely that the Soul may & probably must Survive the Body; but in what state and condition is another question Depending on the state of the soul itself—Shall it's [sic] Life meet with Life? Or shall it be Life in Death and in a world of Death? (5823)

As long as such questions still interrupt his disquisitions on Job, we cannot read him as "sure" that life continues into immortality (5827). At least twice in these laments he quotes his own "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (5689, 5823). He thus reminds his readers that uncertainties—was the universe cruel and meaningless, or will it be salvaged in the end by a benevolent guardian of meaningfulness?—were with him from the start and that he is conscious of this continuity in his thought whether in poetry or in speculative notebooks.

When he contemplates the future of the individual soul his doubts become even more disturbing:

> My Soul, *My*?—Yes, as long as Sin reigns, so long must this '*my'* have a tremendous force, a substantial Meaning. Every Sin & thought of Sin sink us back in upon the swampy rotten ground of our division from God, make us participants and accomplices of the Hades, the only conceivable Contrary of God— (*CN* 5, 5931).

How much of the body ascends with the soul? How much of the individual self is included in the soul? Does the body confer individuality? Anthony Harding formulates Coleridge's quandary: "the issue… was whether anything peculiar to the individual human being, to the person we know in this life, survived, and if so, whether this being, in its future state, would meet with life, or only (like the Ancient Mariner) with Life in Death" (210). Is the soul in the abstract "one size fits all," a universal, generic soul as in Hinduism, or does it carry along with it all the individuality of the unique person?

The question of how much of the person continues into the afterlife if there is one narrows onto his own person. Here is the rub. Does the soul of STC deserve to live on? And if so where? What is the "my" in the phrase "my Soul"? It might be "considered as continuous evolutions & vegetations of the Adamic Soul" (5522). Does it include all my accumulated failings? Is there some part of my soul that is not tainted? His personal "me" will never escape: "the fear from the sense of my unworthiness & emptiness overlays my hope—I remain in it, a paralytic but yet a living Nerve!" (6621). More dramatically, he cries: "But I feel and find only the weakness, darkness, emptiness, hollowness, which are my Self—I do not find myself …one with God—" (6623). As he asks in a late essay on suicide, does the bad soul's person, the owner of this "property," the agent, have the right to exterminate it? (SWF 1, 407-8). In him lurks the "secret lodger." This is a cold dark spot in his soul or consciousness that alienates him from hope for the future. Nested within him since the onset of consciousness, the secret lodger withdraws into its negation. Coleridge reveals this core of denial in the midst of one of his most confident texts, *Aids to Reflection*, confessing that he is alienated from God and is conscious of "a weak incapability of willing it away."[12]

[12] *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), p. 24. and note 1. See also *CN* 4, 5275.

Many entries in CN 5 express hope for a future life, most notably the famous decision to "receive the sacrament—for the first time since my first year at Jesus College," at the eleventh hour, after "33 years absent from my Master's Table" (5703; Christmas Day, 1827), and thus to rejoin the community of Christians despite his sense of personal unworthiness. Suzanne Webster accentuates passages that promise futurity, that demonstrate the continuity of the secondary consciousness over the gap of death. How long does the gap last? A second? A century? Till the second coming? She examines this gap between what she calls the "pre-mortem human" and "the post-mortem human" to determine whether it is physiological or spiritual (164-191). She concludes that "Coleridge was certain that the individual's living and post-mortem Personal Identities could not be completely different" (191). She believes that the "pre-mortem human" and the "post-mortem human" are continuous, but troubling passages persist. The Hebrew fathers do not provide comfort; the grisly fact of the corporeality of the human body discourages faith even as it makes it psychologically necessary; the examination of his own consciousness as a person daunts him. Words like "demersion" and "Centaurization" suggest his inventive play with the entangled relations of body and mind. He admits "how readily should I adopt Ben Spinoza's theory of Immortality, if Conscience, and Christian Humility did not necessarily link it to my *individual Despair*" (5911).[13]

"The wicked whisper comes" early and alternates with prayerful hopes. In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," an epic of "the ontological indeterminacy of the modern autonomous and voluntarist self," to use Thomas Pfau's phrase, the mariner "shatters the cosmos."[14] The ship sinks to the bottom of the sea, releasing only the narrator who has caused the catastrophe and who lies recumbent on the surface. Do the saints take pity on him or not? Does God care about him, or abandon him? He lives to join a comforting community, but what about the sailors, including his brother's son? Do their souls go to heaven? To hell? Their bodies to the bottom of the ocean? Is his heart dry as dust or gushing with emotion? "Sure my kind saint took pity on/ my soul in agony," or "Nary a saint" did so? How do we know? Evidence for either interpretation is visible and audible. Which to choose? And should we even try to choose?

2. Circularities

Coleridge worries about the meaning of life if there were nothing after death. In his poem "Human Life: On the Denial of Immortality" (*PW* 482) he speculates about the possible absence of an afterlife, imagining an emptiness, a meaningless void, surrounding the evaporated spirit and disintegrating body.

[13] Nick Halmi, "Coleridge's Ecumenical Spinoza," in *Spinoza Beyond Philosophy*, ed. Beth Lord (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2015), 188-207, shows Coleridge's "infinite irresolution" toward Spinoza's view of matter.

[14] Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 454-5.

This scenario is superficially similar to one that the secular modern poet Philip Larkin takes for granted: "the total emptiness for ever/ The sure extinction that we travel to/ And shall be lost in always."[15] Coleridge's poem probes the "sure extinction" as a thought experiment. He imagines "a fearful futurity" (*OM* 233) and applies it retroactively to the meaningfulness of the life that precedes it.

No matter how forthright Coleridge's poem seems, it is nevertheless mysterious as a truth-statement. Does he take his hypothesis seriously? Is he mocking people who believe that there is nothing after death? Does he present such a horrifying possibility as self-evidently absurd? If so, would the absurdity be evident to doubters as well as to believers? Or would only the few spirits who know that "the sources must be far higher and far inward" understand that the poem implies its own negation?[16] The answer to the question, where do we go from here, is ambiguous.

The poem takes the form of a double sonnet, with the final, 29th, line summarizing both parts. The first sonnet postulates that our life has no meaning without an afterlife. Speaking from the third person plural, where "we" seems to mean all of the people who do not believe in life after death, it begins abruptly, with a disdainful fatality:

> If dead, we cease to be; if total gloom
> Swallow up life's brief flash for aye, we fare
> As summer-gusts, of sudden birth and doom,
> Whose sound and motion not alone declare,
> But *are* their *whole* of being! (1-5)

If we cease to exist at death, if our life is just a flash in darkness, we are no better than warm breezes that in passing are all that they are, not the language of another life. Coleridge states his postulate with dazzling speed, moving through simile and metaphor, enjambing his lines, and concluding the sentence with a speculation on the difference between words and substance.

The second quatrain pursues the ephemeral quality of wind and breath. When breath stops, the being is dead. Breath does not imply God's presence in us. It does not contain our souls like a tent of tabernacle in which the soul shelters. This meaningless cessation leads to an outcry at human emptiness, now directly addressed to Man as a "Thou" in a fellowship of nullity:

> If the Breath
> Be Life itself, and not its Task and Tent,
> If even a soul like Milton's can know death;
> O Man! Thou vessel purposeless, unmeant,
> Yet drone-hive strange of phantom purposes! (5-9)

[15] Philip Larkin, "Aubade," *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), p. 190.
[16] *Biographia Literaria,* ed. James Engell and W.J.Bate (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 1, 239

With no end goal, man is an empty vessel, turned on a wheel by Nature in an absent mood.[17] Milton's appearance in line 7 suggests that even the packed brilliance of his whole oeuvre is no longer meaningful if we think that the individual writer dies with his body and his soul goes into the earth. Does Milton's soul not live in his creation? Does the reader not hear it in the rhythms of his thought? Even Art does not confer immortality in this poem.

The speaker reviles Man directly—"O Man! thou vessel purposeless", comparing him to a hive of bees—a "drone-hive", without the value or purpose of worker-bees—or with "phantom purposes", active beyond the needs of nature alone, a "Surplus of nature's dread activity." Following that phrase a dependent clause slows the tempo to focus on the process that brought forth this redundant human being:

> Surplus of nature's dread activity,
> Which, as she gazed on some nigh-finished vase,
> Retreating slow, with meditative pause,
> She formed with restless hands unconsciously!
> Blank accident! nothing's anomaly! (10-14)

These lines open a peep hole through which the reader can glimpse nature in "dread activity" in the act of creating life. The scene might be a parody of *Genesis* 2:7, where "God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul," and is shadowed by Genesis 6: 2, 4, where giant sons of God come to ravage the daughters of man. Coleridge suggests that there may have been creations before man, intermingled perhaps with the progressions of animals. Nature works in a daze, "unconsciously," discarding previous work, "some nigh-finished vase," a vessel abandoned in mid swirl. The "nigh-finished vase" may allude to the giant sons of God discarded when nature's dread activity threw out botched forms that did not survive. This clause hints at a long pre-Biblical history in which unfinished products were tossed aside. We were not planned for! We are accidents! We are anomalies in a world where other creatures have meaningful tasks, however lowly. Nouns in apposition pronounce that we are nothing.

There is no pause or breath taken, as Coleridge applies this postulate to the second sonnet. He makes the transition at line 15 by twice using "thus" to recapitulate the argument. But a major shift occurs. From the first person plural *we*, which had been defining our collective human nature in sonnet one, the second sonnet turns to address the other person, the Thou, to rub his nose in the nothingness of all that he feels or thinks:

> If rootless thus, thus substanceless thy state,

[17] David Simpson believes that this image influences Keats in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (Towtowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), note 29, 206.

Go, weigh thy dreams, and be thy Hopes, thy Fears,
The counter-weights! Thy Laughter and thy Tears
Mean but themselves, each fittest to create,
And to repay the other! (15-19)

Go, Thou, says the first quatrain of the second sonnet; see how futile are all your petty wishes and fears!

Who is this "Thou"? If the poet is himself among the skeptical group of people who do not believe in the afterlife, then he must be included in the collective "Thou" that suffers the consequences of eternal death. At the turn in mid poem from the first to the second sonnet, Coleridge could then be chastising himself along with fellow skeptics and trying to cajole himself into a faith that would give his life and his passions significance. As it is, his dreams are balanced by his Hopes and Fears, his Laughter by his Tears, in a suspended uncertainty between hope and dread.

Coleridge goes on to argue that none of our grief for ourselves or our loved ones matters if we do not expect a future life. What we do, good or bad, what we experience, what we love, crumbles to nothingness in the face of the idea of total extinction:

Why rejoices
Thy heart with hollow joy for hollow good?
Why cowl thy face beneath the Mourner's hood,
Why waste thy sighs, and thy lamenting voices,
Image of Image, Ghost of Ghostly Elf,
That such a thing as thou feel'st warm or cold? (19-24)

To mourn the death of a loved one or to rejoice at his happiness are both worthless responses in the face of death without immortality. The person is ghostly, not a person but a *thing*. Being does not matter if it ceases at death:

Be sad! Be glad! Be neither! seek, or shun!
Thou has no reason why! Thou can'st have none!
Thy being's being is contradiction. (27-29).

Who cares what you think or feel, for Life is cancelled by Death. Rather than being treasured all the more for its fragility, as it would be in an epicurean belief system, life is worthless because it does not continue.

Like Coleridge's poem, Philip Larkin's "Aubade" from 1965 describes total nothingness after death, "the total emptiness forever" (l. 6). Both poets feel horror before this contemplation. Both relish the grisly details of human nothingness. But the elder poet wants this state not to be true, whereas the younger declares it to be all that we can expect. The first writhes at the possible vision, the second is calmly stoical about it, believing that any rational person would know that this was all there was to life. Even now, readers shudder at

such nullity. Helen Vendler writes that "Larkin's work has been rebuked on psychological grounds even by fellow poets who, instinctively, dislike his unrelenting atheism and pessimism. Resistance to his poetry, in poets who do not share his devastating candour, stems from a wish for some concession to a more heartening position."[18] No one likes contemplating extinction.

Two readings of "Human Life…", one by Edward Kessler in 1979 and the other by Onita Vaz-Hooper in 2009, demonstrate both this resistance and the circular method out of it. Both readings argue with close attention to the complex form that the poem resolves its own question in a positive way; both advocate hope for immortality. Remarkably, both readings demonstrate in themselves the circular reasoning that Coleridge recognizes as the only proof for immortality. Kessler writes that the poem begins with a "*faulty* premise," that "if dead, we cease to be" and relentlessly moves toward nihilism. He sees the poem as ironic, and states that the "true subject" of the poem is "a belief in immortality that makes speculation *absurd*".[19] Dismissing any claim that Coleridge might be seriously thinking about nullity, Kessler states that "he assumes an absurd position in order to prove a sound one" (71). He calls "falsehoods" the series of ideas in the "If clauses" and says that "the poet chooses to employ contradictions until we can see beyond them [to] `a new faculty'."(71) Kessler insists that "the poet brings to his poem, as *we must bring to our reading of it*, the presumption of permanent Being" (72; my italics). The "despair" in "Human Life" "serves an eventual joyful affirmation" (75), for in his darkest hour, Coleridge "never doubted his need for permanent Being" (76). Kessler attributes to Coleridge a certainty of permanent being, generated by "his need" for it, that the poem has not unambiguously affirmed.

Similarly, Vaz-Hooper argues that Coleridge's poem ends by asserting "that immortality is a fact" (534). She reads the poem as ironic because, in her view, "the breath of humans is not the entirety of life, but is indicative of man's soul which enables him to have an existence beyond his physical death" (538). In her ingenious reading, Coleridge's "argument" is "that death does *not* extinguish life" (538; my italics). Is she stating her own opinion or summarizing Coleridge's opinion in a way that corresponds to her own? In a twist, however, Vaz-Hooper claims that Kessler sees the poem as a negative expression of despair, stresses its failure, and describes man as "valueless matter" (535), whereas in fact, as we saw above, Kessler himself makes the same swerve that Vaz-Hooper makes: he claims that the poem establishes the "absurdity of non-belief" (72). Vaz-Hooper turns in a circle: "the fact that man is saddled with [purposes] must gesture to the *need* for a purposeful existence since *man's anxiety itself presumes purposefulness"* (532; my italics).[20]

Vaz-Hooper's argument follows Kessler's closely. Both cite Coleridge's

[18] Helen Vendler, "Why aren't they screaming? Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love," *London Review of Books*, 36, 41 (6 Nov 2014), 18-22, p. 19.

[19] Edward Kessler, *Coleridge's Metaphors of Being* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), 69.

[20] Onita Vaz-Hooper, "`if dead we cease to be': the logic of immortality in Coleridge's `Human life'", *European Romantic Review* 20, 4, (Oct. 2009), 529-544, 534.

Friend that in giving us a conscience God gave us an immortal soul (*F*, 2, 78-79). Both assume that readers will conclude their reading of the poem with a new conviction that immortality exists. They both envision that the reader will create his or her own conclusion by saying: "If that is so, Then, I couldn't live on, so I will believe that my spirit lives after death." Both critics believe that the poem concludes by proving that human life continues after death. Both import material from other writings by Coleridge to provide the answer that they seek. Coleridge may eventually reject this proposition also, but not in this poem. "Human Life: On the Denial of Immortality" is Coleridge's "Il Penseroso." It awaits its companion piece in which human souls achieve immortality, but Coleridge's "L'Allegro" has not been written.[21] Coleridge's poem in itself leaves its depiction of nothingness unresolved.

"Thy being's being is contradiction": Coleridge quotes the last line in his *Opus Maximum* fragment 3 (226), signaling that the poem's questions continue to trouble him as he transitions from the poet's voice to the philosopher's.[22] The grand aim of the unfinished and labyrinthine *Opus Maximum*, McFarland explains in his prolegomenon, is "to come to terms with the meaning of human life, a question that he saw as having a bearable answer only if the soul is immortal" (cxi). McFarland's reference to "a bearable answer" signals that the search is not a purely intellectual one, but engages the whole being, a being that *needs* this answer and can "bear" no other. So too Kant's three beliefs necessary to human survival—God, immortality, and moral law—are necessary in that they are needed.

In the same fragment, subtitled *On the Divine Ideas*, Coleridge seeks an acceptable foundation from which to judge; but the ground turns out to be the very idea he seeks: "that without which we cannot reason must be presumed as the ground of the reasoning" (270). When he writes that "an idea implies the reality of the thing that to which it corresponds, that it contains the reality as well as its own form" (271), he faces the circularity of his proofs. He acknowledges that appeals to design and teleology are subjective and that no real proof is possible (274). He seems to adapt Kant's recognition of the circularity of such hopes: "I cannot therefore give any but tautological answers to all my questions, because I put my concept and its unity in the place of the qualities that belong to me as an object, and thus really take for granted what was wished to be known." [23] Coleridge turns to an argument based on his intuition, which converges with Anselm's ontological argument, namely that "the reality of an idea implies the existence of that of which it was the idea."[24] He connects this argument with the argument from design to posit that human minds would not have been created to imagine the possibility of life after death

[21] I thank Elisabeth G. Gitter for this fruitful reference.

[22] Peter Larkin in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Promising Losses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 135-47, shows how Coleridge's investigations into the imagination move easily from the Dejection Ode to *Biographia Literaria.*, from the poet's voice to the philosopher's.

[23] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. F. Max Muller (Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Books, 1966), p. 261.

[24] George Boas, "Idea," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 2, 546 b.

if this hope was not going to be fulfilled.

Moving in circles that aspire to be spirals, Coleridge, however, is always conscious that his proof rests on a speculation rooted in human need. As Brice observes, Coleridge "intimately understood the state of homeless skepticism" that he read in Hume.[25] He is alert to the inventedness of his proofs. In saying, "an idea, I repeat, implies the reality of that to which it corresponds, as well as its own formal truth "(*OM,* 271), he is unabashed in recognizing that faith arises out of the desirableness of the condition yearned for. Like his precursor Thomas Reid (1710-1796), Coleridge shows that all arguments about first principles must be circular.[26]

In *OM* 3 Coleridge builds his arguments from the fact of separation, which contains the fall of humanity in *Genesis* and the origination of willful acts, then the desire to repair the separation, which leads to a willed act of reunion. Only those who need it will *will* themselves to feel it and are constitutionally fitted "by nature" to feel it. As in the propositions in the poem "On Human Life," a person foresees with horror the emptiness of life after death and despairs, in some cases unable to live fully because the glare of nothingness casts a shadow over a brief existence.

Seeking as he does for affirmation that he will live on, and thus that his life will have been meaningful, Coleridge asks, will the Soul survive the body? Haunted by his own "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," he asks "Shall it's life meet with Life? Or shall it be Life in Death and in a world of Death?" (March 1828; 5823). As long as such questions still disrupt his disquisitions, it is evident that he is not sure that life continues into immortality. And this "fear of futurity" is not just a matter of not continuing forever, but of not being able to enjoy the actual life that he is living now while he is alive. In August 1831 Coleridge expresses this fear: "Without the faith in the resurrection and the life, the very grass under my feet would turn black before me" (CN 5 6621). His uncertainty stems as well from his own "unworthiness & emptiness" (6621).

The poem depicts what blankness might look like. It is what Coleridge does not want! Who does? From that bleak view, he argues himself away from it by using the *argumentum in circulo* that is the only proof that could be valid for spiritual truths (*BL* 2:244). He grounds his prose argument as always on the human imagination; for the human imagination is capable of envisioning something else, including reasons to hope for an afterlife.

3. Imagined Futurities

Coleridge tells us how to follow the "way, or path of transit" when we read. Like readers of the Bible, we should accumulate wisdom, "gleaning and

[25] Ben Brice, *Coleridge and Scepticism* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 2007) p.190.
[26] Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.: 1983), 290-1.

gathering comfort, as it is scattered through the whole field."[27] In reading we choose, gradually organize, and pursue an onward developing, sometimes tangled, and often circular progression. As we arrange material from the "evolving roll" of Coleridge's prose (*SWF* 441), the ambiguities and ironies of his poems, the humorous asides that may wink at his true thoughts, we create distinctive paths according to our own experiences. We organize him, and he organizes us. He foresees the kinds of readers who will read him in the future and arranges his arguments according to what he imagines will be their capacities to understand. This strategy is useful for presenting arguments on the worrisome question of the afterlife.

Coleridge divides his readers into two groups: the few who believe and see beyond the low enclosing hills, who seek the "horizon" that beckons in Peter Larkin's mysterious phrase, and those who are skeptics and need to be convinced by new arguments since the traditional ones have failed to convince them (*BL* 1, 235-244). He calls these groups Allocosmites for whom the spiritual world is present in the temporal one, and Toutocosmites, who believe that this world is the only one.[28] Dividing his readers into categories on an elitist scale of spirituality, Coleridge assumes that the more spiritual group intuits what he means, whereas the less spiritual group requires a different order of proof to begin to be persuaded. Because he has a skeptical bent himself, he recognizes that the "evidences" in the gospels and in Paul can be doubted and therefore he devises new "proofs" for the continuance of the soul after death that will not be based on shaky testimony. The new arguments are based on how people feel or imagine. Together they form a "natural religion" designed for the skeptical reader.

The two letters about the death of baby Berkeley, one to his wife, one to Poole, one reassuring that being will continue, one admitting that death terrifies and undermines him, launch his lifelong ambiguity: does death end life or does consciousness persist? In 1816 he muses that Death "sudden or otherwise" has "no other demonstrable Action or Consequence than that of removing or incapacitating the means and existing conditions of the manifestation of Life and Mind; and of course, therefore, suspending the manifestation itself" (*SWF* 1, 423-4). Again, two possibilities are hidden in this note: does death "remove" the manifestations, or merely "suspend" them? Coleridge will present similar incompatible alternatives in his final notebooks, asking if there is no gap between life and the beginning of the afterlife (and hence no death) or a gap between death and renewed life, and if so a gap of how long? Religious readers can rely on the doctrines that apply to this moment of transition, but secular readers are left puzzled: do the dead die or start up again sooner or later?

In the 1799 letter to Tom Poole Coleridge exclaims that his "baby has not

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[27] *The Friend*, ed. Barbara Rooke (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969).1, 457; "Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit," *SWF*, 2, 1165.

[28] *On the Constitution of Church and State*, ed. John Colmer (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), 174-185.

lived in vain." His consciousness will continue. "It was *life*–! It was a particle of *Being*--! It was *Power*!--& and *how could* it perish? *Life, Power, Being*!" (*CL* 1, 274).This idea that consciousness cannot die is an early example of Coleridge's most ubiquitous argument for immortality: human life continues after death because consciousness cannot die, or in some other formulations, because human beings cannot imagine that consciousness could die. Being must continue. Once it begins it cannot cease. In the essay "On the Passions," he declares: "the moment the soul affirms, I am, it asserts, I cannot cease to be" (*SWF* 2, 1424). In the *Friend* he marvels at the fact of existence rather than non-existence, a miracle that cannot be ascertained by the organs of sense: "Not To Be, then, is impossible: TO BE, incomprehensible" (*F,* 1, 514). "I am…The Power, that could give me Being, or the active Matters that first constituted my Being, must be adequate to continue it," he insists in a late notebook (5827), even here leaving open the source of that continuation in God or "the active Matters that underlie life." The argument is defiant: I am conscious of being and can pronounce it; therefore I cannot cease to be, or therefore I cannot imagine ceasing to be. The energy of being is so intense that it cannot vanish into nothingness.

Coleridge's expression of this argument is more insistent than most people's, but even the skeptical Mary Wollstonecraft uses it, asking "how can my vital self crumble to dust?—impossible" (cited in Harding, "Hades," 205) In *War and Peace* Pierre enunciates it to Prince Andrew on a raft after the battle of Austerlitz. Pierre says

> Don't I feel that I form one link, one step, between the lower and higher beings, in this vast harmonious multitude of beings in whom the Deity … is manifest? If I see, clearly see, that ladder leading from plant to man, why should I suppose it breaks off at me. . .? I feel that I cannot vanish, since nothing vanishes in this world, but that I shall always exist and always have existed. I feel that beyond me and above me there are spirits, and that in this world there is truth.

Having watched his wife die in childbirth, having been left for dead on the battlefield and rescued by Napoleon himself, Prince Andrew comes to accept Pierre's counsel: "we must live…and we must believe that we live not only today . . .But have lived and shall live forever, there, in the Whole." Andrew and Pierre feel serene as they bond over the shared sense of the prospective continuity of their lives stretching past death into the future, a belief that defies the abyss that each has witnessed.[29] Although Tolstoy's vision involves an almost oceanic continuity with the natural world more pantheistic than Coleridge would like, in that it leaves no gap between the spirit and natural

[29] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942), 241-2.

organisms, they share the hope that consciousness cannot vanish.[30] This belief brings joy.

Such a faith that if you exist and are aware of it then you must continue to exist in a future state seems strange to non-believers. Why could one not be able to imagine that being ceases to exist, especially if one has seen young men rolled under hooves in a cavalry charge? Curtailment of life seems common. One argument still frequently made by believers combines the arguments from need and meaninglessness. "Life is chaos and misery, if it ends in nothingness it makes no sense. The human being needs to imagine consciousness continuing after the absurdity of life."[31]

Hazlitt calls this need for continuity an "effeminate clinging to life" appropriate to an indolent age, degenerated from the gusto of earlier warriors and lovers who threw their lives away for a passion. Young people don't think about death; only old people, already dying piecemeal. He says, "we have an inveterate prejudice in favour of our immediate existence, such as it is." He wonders why believers cannot imagine their own future non-existence. Why is nothingness so hard to fathom? Hazlitt says we are capable of seeing the history of the world before our individual birth as a time sequence in which we did not exist. What prevents us from seeing the next eons as a sequence that similarly does not include our individual consciousnesses? "To die is only to be as we were before we were born; yet no one feels any remorse, or regret, or repugnance, in contemplating this last idea."[32]

One of the strangest arguments for a secular reader to contemplate is the belief that if life does not continue after death then the whole of a person's life span—all the pleasure, care, community, the grief suffered and survived, the love achieved if briefly—is worthless. One might as well not have lived at all. As we saw, this is the argument put forward in Coleridge's poem "Human Life…" and in notes wishing to be struck dead immediately if he cannot live forever. If we supposed we would certainly die, "the mind would have no motive for not dying at the same moment" (*CN* 3, 4356). These chilling exclamations remove the natural pleasure in simple sensation and the finite preciousness of life as it is now. As Philip Kitcher asks, "Why should impermanence cancel meaning?"[33]

On top of the two arguments for the impossibility of imagining an end to being and the retroactive meaninglessness of a lifetime that is not followed by an eternal extension is another argument: the argument from need. The poem "Pains of Sleep" outlines in remarkably rational segments the chaos of

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[30] In a small red notebook from 16 July, 1819, Coleridge succinctly states this fear of merging: "in making Nature God they make God Nature, and fall into all the chaos of Eastern Pantheism. If they include Man in nature, they annul all morality. If they exclude him, all Science, --and how is the latter possible, if nature be God?" (additional mss,47,526, 14a).

[31] My evidence is anecdotal.

[32] William Hazlitt, "On the Fear of Death," from *Table Talk*, 1821, in *Selected Writings*, ed.Ronald Blythe (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 470-81, and "On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth," William Hazlitt, *Literary Remains*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1983), 245-249.

[33] Philip Kitcher, *Life After Faith* (New Haven: Yale Univ.Press, 2014), p. 110.

nightmare, the horror of finding "the unfathomable hell within,/ The horror of their deeds to view,/ To know and loathe, yet wish and do!" (ll.46-48). The poem "Limbo" shudders at the "Horror of blank Naught at all" (*CP* 478, 2, 883, l. 23). If life brings anguish of this unendurable intensity, the human sufferer needs a sense of comfort coming from beyond, for he lacks the power to generate his own consolation. Coleridge confesses, "The personal in me is the ground and condition of Religion" (*CN* 5, 5529), indicating that his very anguish initiates his hope for an afterlife. Coleridge's long study of the different, sometimes overlapping, layers and aspects of human consciousness leads him to posit a special hollow space in the map of the human psyche. That hollow space is "natural" to the human being, ingrown or "inwoven in our Being" (*CN* 3, 4061). This magnetic vacuum (a kind of "black hole") is called need, want, or yearning, with the word "want" having its double meaning of lacking and seeking. Coleridge explores this hollow space in human phrenology in diagrams and notes (*SWF* 2, 1385: "Schema of the Total Man"). It is existential and personal because it describes his own incompleteness and its obverse, the yearning to be completed, to fill the empty space. The argument from need is an almost miraculous construction because out of emptiness grows a something, out of helplessness comes help. Something does come of nothing. Far more central than miracles, the "inward feeling . . . of [the] exceeding *desireableness*—the experience, that he *needs* something" is "the true FOUNDATION of the spiritual Edifice." (*BL* 2, 243). "Want" trumps all the "Evidences of Christianity." "Weary" of "evidences," Coleridge commands: "Make a man feel the want of it; rouse him, if you can to the self-knowledge of his need of it; and you may safely trust it to its own evidence" (*AR*, 348). To believe it you have to want it, and to want it you have to believe it, in the "*argumentum in circulo*" that Coleridge acknowledges is "incident to all spiritual Truths" (*BL* 2, 243-4). A skeptic might still query: Since when do we get what we want just by wanting it?

Coleridge's fourth imaginative argument is the argument from Instinct, a term he defines as "a yearning & presentiment necessary to the existence of a creature" (*CN* 4, 4692). This argument flows from the others, with additional layering from a fanciful science of biology designed to persuade that class of readers whose "spiritual organs" are feebly developed (*BL* 1, 239, 242). Coleridge urges them to raise their ability to interpret the symbolism that the wings of the air-sylph prepare for a future life (*CN* 4824 and 8532), that the calf anticipates his future life as a bull by having rudimentary horns (*C&S*, 176). Even the human baby is equipped with mechanisms for coping with a life beyond the womb. If all natural beings instinctively and unconsciously prepare for a future life, so, by analogy, and necessarily on a different level, do human beings ready themselves for a future life.

The arguments presented in this section—from instinct, need, meaninglessness, and the continuousness of consciousness—stem from the initiative of the mind (*F* 1, 472-3). They cohere by an act of Coleridge's imagination and thus justify Coleridge's subtitle to *Opus Maximum* fragment 2:

"Origin of Idea of God in Mind of Man." To declare that these arguments derive from the imagination does not "deconstruct" them by making them merely imaginary or verbal, as Stephen Cole claims,[34] but rather it roots the shaping of these hopes in the "shaping power of the imagination," which is "inexhaustibly re-ebullient" (*BL* 1, 300). Far from deconstructing, it constructs. Imagination enacts coherence rather than fictiveness in endeavors whether artistic, intellectual, or spiritual. Ronald Wendling describes imagination in spiritual terms as "the continuously recreating and redeeming divine logos existing within each human soul" (154). Coleridge acknowledges that all arguments about the spirit or the connection of the human mind to supernatural powers must necessarily be circular and come out of the mind (*BL* 2, 224). Not everyone will accept such arguments. In his two-tiered audience secular readers with their poorly developed spiritual organs can still participate through the metaphorical and sometimes sensuous illuminations deliberately provided for them. For those who already believe, the arguments will add to accepted beliefs about human resurrection in the wake of Christ's resurrection; for those who do not believe, they will provide inward, "natural," and psychological speculations on "the last things." Thus Coleridge himself makes Coleridge available to non-believers.

Creating order is an act of imagination that skeptics and believers share. Songs, systems, and beliefs are constructions to live by. In sum, Coleridge requires that an afterlife must exist for his own happiness. Yet his rational mind throws barriers in the way of belief. These skeptical worries occupied part one of this essay. Once Coleridge realized that belief is insusceptible of proof and based by necessity on circular reasoning, he addresses the circularity, the subject of part two. In order to escape the circularity the poet-philosopher engages his imagination to create four new arguments for the existence of an afterlife, based neither on doctrine nor on sensuous proofs, as presented in part three. Coleridge thus recognizes the fragility of belief, its circularity, and finally its implication in the necessity of his being as shaped by the shaping spirit of imagination.

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[34] Steven E. Cole, "The Logic of Personhood: Coleridge and the Social Production of Agency," *SiR* 30, 1 (Spring 1991), 85-111, identifies skepticism with deconstructionism, rather than noting that deconstructionism is a radical subset of scepticism wherein all language says the opposite of what it seems to say. (See Tilottama Rajan, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), 16-17). Seeing Coleridge as a philosopher and a poet allows the reader to observe him deliberately offering ambiguous or even contradictory meanings in both prose and poems, rather than being caught unaware by his own wayward discourse.