The Consolation of Friendship

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COLERIDGE WAS SOMETIMES, WE SHOULD ADMIT, a rather bad friend. How often do we imagine him as the unsteady houseguest, living a bit too long in the home of this or that acquaintance, for his jealousy, the annoying tendency to dominate a conversation, or even in the disastrous friendship that married life with Sarah (Fricker) Coleridge entailed? As much as any of his most devoted readers might wish to go back in time to enjoy a conversation with the great man, I cannot help but wonder whether we too would find our patience tested and that we might wonder if we'd be better off avoiding any sort of real relationship with the man.

Negative personal experiences, no doubt, contributed to Coleridge's views on friendship, and yet those failures in and of themselves are not the whole story.[1] In fact, friendship is a theme in the writings of many of the great philosophers and poets over the centuries, and innumerable writers before him, including Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Montaigne, Francis Bacon, and Immanuel Kant, subjected friendship to the closest scrutiny and examination.[2] So, it should come as no surprise that Coleridge—that modern polymath—ought to have weighed friendship as a matter of intellectual interest in his own lifetime. For this reason, I would like to consider the "Consolations and Comforts" project by tracing out some of Coleridge's thinking about friendship and how a consideration of friendship necessarily draws us into a discussion of love. More specifically, I believe that Coleridge's plan for "Consolations and Comforts" invoked a view of friendship that brings us into the heart of his philosophy of the human person and indicates the significance of embodied life in a way that we might otherwise overlook.

The Ladder of Friendship

Perhaps as good a place as any to begin is with Coleridge's noted letter to Tom Poole, dated 15th January 1804, in which he offers the full title of his planned work: "Of it's Contents the Title will in part inform you—Consolations and Comforts from the exercise and right application of the Reason, the Imagination, and the moral Feelings, addressed especially to those in Sickness, Adversity, or Distress of mind, *from speculative Gloom, &c.*".[3] The letter arrests our attention, if only for Coleridge's prescient intimation of works yet to be written. Scholars agree that in this letter Coleridge projects already what will later become *The Friend*, *Biographia Literaria*, *Logic*, and the *Opus Maximum*. While we tend to look back on his life and see all these works as abortive,

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1 Helpful works on Coleridge and friendship include Anthony John Harding, *Coleridge and the Idea of Love: Aspects of relationship in Coleridge's Thought and Writing* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974) and Suzanne E. Webster, *Body and Soul in Coleridge's Notebooks, 1827–1834: What is Life?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

2 For a helpful anthology of key writings on friendship, see *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, ed. Michael Pakaluk (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

3 *CL*, II, 1035–36 (January 1804).

fragmentary pieces of the unfinished "great work," looking forward from 1804 offers a different view of the matter entirely: those later works are aspects of an earlier promise.

Other notes and letters from around this same time provide a further indication of what's at stake in the "Consolations and Comforts" project, including friendship and the role that love might play in the relief that friendship provides. In one notebook describing "The Soother of Absence," a project he closely associated with "Consolations and Comforts," Coleridge reminds himself to discuss "my utter want of Sympathy with all the ordinary Love-poems, complaining of the Cruelty of my Mistress, of her attachment to another &c—in short, all that supposes that I could love with no knowledge of being loved in return—or even with the knowledge of the contrary."[4] Even if we think of the "Consolations and Comforts" project as finding fulfillment in later works of literary criticism, political theory, or philosophical and theological exposition, Coleridge closely associated the original vision with an extended meditation on personal relationships.

The clearest sense of his view of friendship and love appears only a few years later, in notebooks that demonstrate the entanglement between his intellectual pursuit of the idea of friendship and the manner in which his personal life continuously erupted through these reflections. Among the most insightful comments Coleridge makes on friendship appears in a notebook from March 1808, in which he articulates what I call Coleridge's "Ladder of friendship." He begins with a step-by-step portrait of ascending affections:

> The desire and endeavor to promote the welfare of another equally as our own is Friendship/to prefer it to our own whenever they one or the other must be sacrificed, is the height of Friendship—To do all this and in addition to all this to receive all our happiness by giving it, is *Love!* & when we receive by giving, & give happiness by receiving it, this is mutual Love—the best Emblem & Foretaste of Heaven.[5]

Notably, Coleridge not only provides this four-step vision of ascending degrees of friendship, but also turns to desire—a continual preoccupation during these years—in order to address the problem of sorting out desire and love: "Why then should I fear or blush to say, I *love* you—love you always, and if I sometimes feel desire at the same time, yet Love endures when no such feeling blends with it—yet I desire because I love, & not Imagine that I love because I desire".[6] Love, here, is constant; desire only occasional and dependent on love.

Coleridge's "ladder of friendship" is certainly elevated language and reflects, in many ways, his clearest thoughts on the idea. We might usefully compare his views to Aristotle's notions of friendship here, too, since he seems to achieve something of the virtue-based view of friendship that reveals friendship in its highest form, whereas elsewhere Coleridge risks reducing friendship to its

4 *CN*, II, 2062 (May 1804).
5 *CN*, III 3284 (*c.* March 1808).
6 *CN*, III 3284.

utility or pleasures alone. The ladder, with its implications for desire, appeals to hope in a way that he frequently yearns after but seems never entirely able to achieve.[7]

We can fruitfully compare Coleridge's beliefs to those of Immanuel Kant, whose moral philosophy he admired. In brief, Kant thought all action could be reduced to two central motives: self-love and love of humanity.[8] But there is a conflict between the two, obliging individuals to make a choice. If we prioritize our own interests, we see the lack of moral value in our action. However, if everyone acted for the good of others, we would have little reason to worry about our own self-interest. Kant believes that in looking after the needs of others, we find that our own happiness is already secured. This is friendship: "The maximum reciprocity of love is friendship, and friendship is an idea because it is the measure by which we can determine reciprocal love."[9] Kant's emphasis on concern for the other, however, does not involve such a denial of self that one denigrates individual identity. Instead, friendship requires self-love: "The greatest love I can have for another is to love him as myself. I cannot love another more than I love myself. But if I am to love him as I love myself[,] I must be sure that he will love me as he loves himself in which case he restores to me that with which I part and I come back to myself again."[10]

The reciprocity of friendship and love in Kant certainly resonates with Coleridge's reflections on the subject, and even explains his anxiety over failures of love. When Coleridge complains of Sarah Coleridge's failures in marital friendship, he is in some sense repeating ideas that are very much in line with Kant's stated views: "Uprightness of disposition, sincerity, trustworthiness, conduct devoid of all falsehood and spite, and a sweet, cheerful and happy temper, these are the elements which make up the character of a perfect friend; and once we have made ourselves fit objects of friendship we may be sure that we shall find some one who will take a liking to us and choose us for a friend, and that on closer contact our friendship will grow and become more and more intimate."[11] And, yet, this "we may be sure" seems to be the dagger that repeatedly broke Coleridge's heart.[12]

Consider again how Coleridge treats the relationship between friendship and love. In a notebook entry written around 1810, for instance, the mutuality of friendship appears once again:

> To find our happiness incomplete without the happiness of some other <given> person or persons—is the definition of affection in general, and

[7] For a helpful articulation of some of these Aristotelian distinctions vis-à-vis Thomas Aquinas, see Daniel Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), 15.

[8] This exposition of Kant depends in part on the excellent summary by Pakaluk in *Other Selves*, 208–9.

[9] Immanuel Kant, "Lecture on Friendship," in *Other Selves*, 211.

[10] Kant, "Lecture on Friendship," 211–12.

[11] Kant, "Lecture on Friendship," 216.

[12] As we see not only in Coleridge's love for Sara Hutchinson but also in his failed friendship with Wordsworth. Again, consider Kant: "We must so conduct ourselves towards a friend that there is no harm done if he should turn into an enemy. . . . [W]e ought to place no weapon in the hands of a hot-headed friend who might be capable of sending us to the gallows in a moment of passion, though he would implore our pardon as soon as he had cooled down" (Kant, "Lecture on Friendship," 217).

> applies equally to Friendship, to the parental and <to> the conjugal Relation—but what is Love? Love as it may subsist between <two> persons of different sexes? This: and what more than this?—The mutual dependence of their Happiness, each on that of the other, each being at once cause & effect—You, therefore I—I, therefore you.[13]

What stands out here is Coleridge's striking insistence on the mutuality of personhood. Friendship involves the other to such a degree that one discovers not only a moral concern for the friend but also the foundation for selfhood. This emphasis is part of Coleridge's distinctive philosophy and yet seems everywhere impacted by his personal relationships (e.g., Wordsworth).[14]

Elsewhere, the mutuality of friendship takes a decidedly personal and embodied quality. In a note on Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (1642), Coleridge indicates that, on the ladder of love, marital love achieves the highest levels of mutuality in the union of bodies and potential for childbearing: "Friendship satisfies the *highest* parts of our nature; but a wife, who is capable of friendship, satisfies *all*." Why? Coleridge thinks that embodied love fulfills nature rather than denying it, establishing "a concord and unity betwixt all parts of our nature," giving "a Feeling & a Passion to our purer Intellect," and intellectualizing "our feelings & passions." This is the same reason, he thinks, that St. Paul uses marriage as an image of the union between Christ and the church, since such a relationship signifies the pinnacle of embodied relationality.[15]

Here again it helps to see Coleridge's ideas of love and friendship within the longer tradition, in particular the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas. Coleridge's view of marriage as a kind of love is both similar to and different from Thomas, for whom marriage is a kind of friendship: "Like all friendship, matrimony requires certain acts of the will on the person who, we presume, is a friend".[16] For Thomas, matrimony differs from other friendships in that marriage has (1) a goal of procreation and education of offspring, (2) a lasting bond given such goals, and (3) a sacramental aspect since it is a holy thing before God. Coleridge shares that sacramental sense, yet also sees the continuity of friendship and love as a kind of spiritual ascent; he places the accent on love as a higher good to be cherished rather than one form of friendship among many others.

The image of a ladder of ascent helps to answer a classic problem, namely whether we can show love of neighbor to all people equally. Coleridge thinks that the combination of friendship and love together exceeds the value of

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[13] *CN*, III, 4036 (*c.* 1810).

[14] Friendship is paramount in Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (with Coleridge, but also Dorothy, Mary Hutchinson, and others). Coleridge objected to Wordsworth's notion that "the purest love is no more than Friendship + Lust," asserting that "[w]ere this the truth, a woman might be in love with half a dozen Persons. But all, who are capable of Love, know that it must be exclusive—and the reason is evident, when it is seen that Friendship is Sympathy, but Love Correspondence—not a juxta-position of homonimous poles . . . but the Union of opposite Poles.—Hence too the more intense the Individuality in a man, the more necessarily is his Love exclusive" (*CM*, II, 197).

[15] *CM*, I, 751.

[16] Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship*, 98.

friendship alone precisely because we cannot love many people equally: "There will be *differences*, there will be *gradations*—our nature imperiously asks a *summit*, a *resting-place*—it is with the affections in Love, as with the Reason in Religion—we cannot *diffuse* & equalize—we must have a SUPREME—a *One the highest*."[17] Thus, an observer may say of man in love that "he idolizes her" or "he makes *a god* of her," but reciprocity is necessary for such a love to reach its perfection.

Throughout all these comments, Coleridge's own experience of failure in love and a perceived lack of reciprocity in his relationships comes through.[18] His beliefs about friendship and love were not straightforwardly the result of serene reflection and intellectual pursuit under the shady branches of emotional tranquility. Rather, they are splintered by agonizing despair and self-pity, particularly in relation to his affection for Sara Hutchinson:

> Unhappy I!—I have loved many more than ever I loved myself, & one beyond myself, & beyond all things, & all persons—but never, never, have I met with any Being who did not love many better than they loved me—Several Women that would have married me because no one whom they better loved, was in their power; but never any one, who would have married me, because they loved *me* better than any one. This seems the complaint of Selfishness; yet it is in truth the pang most felt by such as have least selfishness & most constancy of nature . . .[19]

The notion that he might love Asra (his cipher for Sara Hutchinson later in the note) more is mere blasphemy. Still, other friendships also consume him. The death of a friend brings pining and "an aching hollowness in my heart," yet of the prospect of one who has wronged us, "O then what solace can we find? While we love him, how can there be solace?"[20] True friendship only finally ends with death.

Friendship, Love, and Hope

Later in life, Coleridge continued to think on friendship and love. More than once, I've smirked at the sight of Coleridge's advice to a correspondent about

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[17] *CM*, I, 751; cf. Kant: "Is every man a possible friend for us? No. I can be a friend of mankind in general in the sense that I can bear good-will in my heart towards everyone, but to be the friend of everybody is impossible, for friendship is a particular relationship, and he who is a friend to everyone has no particular friend" (Kant, "Lecture on Friendship," 217).

[18] I think it's worth noting here that while Coleridge struggled immensely in his relationship with various women, he seems committed to the idea that true friendship is possible among men and women. This goes without saying in our own day and age, but has not always been the case. Consider, for example, Jeremy Taylor's *Discourse on the Nature, Offices and Measures of Friendship* (1657), where he calls marriage "the queen of friendships" and specifically addresses the dignity of women in this regard. I believe Coleridge's emphasis on the mutuality of being allowed him to call a woman a friend precisely because he recognized mutuality persons above the mere desire to use another body only to satisfy individual appetite. For a helpful examination of Coleridge's positive relationship with Ann Gillman, see Graham Davidson, "Duty and Power: Conflicts of the Will in Coleridge's Creation of the Self," in *Coleridge's Assertion of Religion: Essays on the* Opus Maximum, ed. Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Louvain: Peeters, 2006), 121–44 (esp. 136–44).

[19] *CN*, III, 3442.

[20] *CN*, III, 4039.

love or parenting in later writings. There's a tremendous irony that anyone would have sought the views of such an abject failure in his relationships. Yet this study of friendship as related to the "Consolations and Comforts" project has given me some reason to pause and rethink things just a bit. For, while Coleridge undoubtedly failed as a friend, husband, and father, he also seems to have learned some lessons on which he reflected in later years.

In one note on marriage, Coleridge warns a prospective husband against non-reciprocal love. The man in question feels "an honorable but ardent Love." But the woman openly denies the ability to "return it *in kind*." Her esteem is not enough—even the love of a sibling cannot suffice, however satisfying their friendship: "No! my friend! I cannot approve of the scheme—. If you have yourself given up all hope of qualifying vivifying her friendship into Love, you must (however severe the struggle may be) deaden your Love into Friendship. . . . In short, Love and Love reciprocally inclose and circum*vest* each the other like cycloeidal plates".[21]

In another marginal note, Coleridge describes friendship in terms that reveal a wisdom borne of experience and a self-awareness of the consequences for friendship of his own addictive behavior. "We are all, the best of us, imperfect Mortals, more or less laden with Sins, and sin-begotten infirmities," Coleridge admits. "If we deemed no one worthy the name and duties of a Friend, but one who in no part of his conduct and character gave reasons for regret or for blame, Friendship could have no existence on earth, nor any occasion for displaying itself."[22] With this prefatory remark in mind, he then offers three rules of friendship—requirements of a friend *not in the abstract* but concretely in his own life. First, a charitable understanding of the circumstances in which a friend suffers (e.g., various temptations faced by the friend). Second, "a prompt & unsparing Opennenss" between parties, particularly with reference to wrongs. Finally, the necessity of hope: "the holiest office of Friendship, *hope* even against Hope for the sustentation of Hope in our poor self-condemning Friend."

Strikingly, this practical guide to the experience of friendship differs from so many other notes on the subject in Coleridge's focus on his own failures rather than the shortcomings of others. He worries not that he has been unloved by those he idolizes, but rather that his own frailties have tested the limits of friendship. Hope is certainly not absent in earlier writings, of course, but in previous years his focus regularly shifts from friendship to the higher ideal of romantic love and embodied affection. Moreover, Coleridge's turn to hope in friendship in later writings has a distinctly religious aspect. This is not surprising on a biographical level, but I think it should be noted here again that Coleridge stands well within the philosophical tradition. Thomas Aquinas, for one, thought that hope in friendship might allow an individual to serve as a

[21] *CN*, IV, 5459. At this point in the notebook Coleridge includes a rough sketch of a spiral image, akin to a single-line hypnotic swirl,. According to the *OED*, a cycloid is "[t]he curve traced in space by a point in the circumference (or on a radius) of a circle as the circle rolls along a straight line."
[22] *CM*, IV, 9–10.

conduit of divine love. Just this sort of friendship—this sort of *love*—is what the tradition often calls *charity*. Thomas believed that hope provides the basis for "a kind of enlargement of the self" whereby cooperation between friends becomes truly possible and ultimately fulfilling.[23]

Although beyond the scope of this talk, I should also note that these late observations on hope in friendship may enrich our understanding of what Coleridge often intimates in his later poetry, where glimpses on the theme of friendship appear occasionally. This study suggests that these are not reducible to mere turns of phrase; rather, such remarks belong to what he once proposed as the great work of his life. For example, the lines in "Youth and Age"—"Love is flower-like; / Friendship is a sheltering tree"—may be a variation on the "ladder of friendship" I have already described.[24] Here, the image is inverted from an upward ascent to an organic appeal to interiority. Elsewhere, as in "Work without Hope," signs of embodied love are intimated in the final couplet: "Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve; / And Hope without an object cannot live."[25] Such lines are yet another sign that, for Coleridge, the mutual, embodied life of the other is at the core of our personhood.

Yet, as I have indicated, I think many of these ideas are already present (if sometimes only implicitly) in the earlier writings. So, it seems fitting to end this talk where we began: the letter to Poole on the "Consolations and Comforts" project. For while we have tended to look at the description of the work for signs of publications yet to come, it is easy to overlook a rather remarkable statement on the sympathy of friendship that he addresses to his friend in the lines that immediately follow:

> I love & honor you, Poole! for many things—scarcely for any thing more than that, trusting firmly in the Rectitude & simplicity of your own Heart, and listening with faith to it's revealing Voice, you never suffered either my Subtlety or my Eloquence to proselyte you to the pernicious Doctrine of Necessity / all praise to the Great Being who has graciously enabled me to find my way out of that labyrinth-Den of Sophistry, &, I would fain believe, to bring with me a better clue than has hitherto been known, to enable others to do the same.[26]

While many felt overpowered by Coleridge's eloquent speech and necessitarian

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[23] On friendship and hope in Aquinas, see Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship*, 94–122; cf. Jeremy Taylor's recognition of the imperfections of friendship: ". . . as all our graces here are but imperfect, that is, at the best they are but tendencies to glory, so our friendships are imperfect too, and but beginnings of a celestial friendship, by which we shall love every one as much as they can be loved" (*Discourse on the Nature, Offices and Measures of Friendship*, in *The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Jeremy Taylor*, ed. Reginald Heber and Charles Page Eden [London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1854], 73).

[24] *PW*, I.2, 1012–13.

[25] *PW*, I.2, 1032–33. I highly recommend the illuminating paper delivered by Felicity James ("The Comforts of Family") at this same session and printed in this issue, where she concludes with thoughts on Coleridge's daughter Sara, who reflected on her relationship with her father in verses of her own.

[26] *CL*, II, 1036.

intellect,[27] Poole stayed true to his own heart and, in this way, true to his friendship with Coleridge. Such a sympathy of being, so seldom found in this world, sustained Coleridge and proved the virtuousness of their friendship. May we all hope for such a friend.

[27] Scholars have rightly scrutinized Coleridge's commitment to necessitarianism. Basil Willey, for instance, doubts Coleridge's allegiance in a letter to Southey, stating "Yet, how seriously is this to be taken?—for Coleridge only brings it in so as to quote a parody of this very doctrine which he has just written (in a letter to Favell). One must never forget that Coleridge was . . . a quick-change artist, delighting to don one intellectual suit after another, and to speak and think in the appropriate dialect" (*Samuel Taylor Coleridge* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1971], 48).