Coleridge on Self-consciousness and Imagination in the *Biographia Literaria*: The Creative Core Connecting the Infinite and Finite "I Am"

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THE IDEA OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IS CENTRAL TO THE PHILOSOPHY that Coleridge expounds in Chapters 12 and 13 of the *Biographia*.[1] Here, Coleridge formulates a narrow epistemological argument, positing the principle of self-consciousness as a first principle on the basis of which he intends to build a more comprehensive, ultimately religious, philosophy. In this paper, I examine Coleridge's narrow argument in relation to his more comprehensive philosophical vision. In this respect, I explain why Coleridge viewed the principle of self-consciousness as having the capacity to serve not only as an immediate and certain first principle of knowing, but also as a persuasive mediate principle in other not strictly epistemological domains. Finally, I demonstrate that Coleridge's principle of self-consciousness necessitates the idea of the human faculty of Imagination. Moreover, I contend that, in the *Biographia*, Coleridge envisions Imagination at the core of his total and undivided philosophy, and more importantly, as the core power connecting the finite self-consciousness with the infinite I AM.

Coleridge's Narrow Epistemological Argument

The goal of Coleridge's narrow epistemological argument within the context of transcendental philosophy is to establish the principle of self-consciousness as an immediate and certain truth, or first epistemological principle, on the basis of which all human knowledge is grounded. This principle can be found in the state of self-consciousness that is common to all self-conscious human beings, making it an immediately accessible, universally attainable truth.[2] This principle, however, cannot be fully realized via this common state of self-consciousness alone. Indeed, this common state is the exterior layer, if you will, of a more deeply penetrating, higher degree of self-consciousness that Coleridge distinguishes as "philosophic" (BL I 236).[3] In contrast with the "spontaneous" and "natural" state of the common consciousness, the philosophic consciousness is a freely-willed (and thus, "artificial"), contemplative activity of

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1 All primary text material is from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions*, 1817, in *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). That edition notes every instance of Coleridge's borrowings from Schellling. In the original conference paper, I added a reference for each of these borrowings, directing readers to Engell's notes. Because of space, I have removed these from this article.

2 Coleridge refers to this common state of self-consciousness variously as "spontaneous consciousness," "common consciousness," and "natural consciousness" (see Coleridge, BL I 236, 242, 243).

3 Coleridge describes the philosophic consciousness as that which "lies beneath (or as it were) *behind* the spontaneous consciousness natural to all reflecting beings," an idea I attempt to express with the image of the spontaneous consciousness as an "exterior layer" of the more deeply penetrating, higher degree of philosophic consciousness. Coleridge also refers to the philosophic consciousness as the "ulterior consciousness" (see Coleridge, BL I 243).

self-consciousness that is directed primarily at itself and its own nature (BL I 236).[4] The philosophic consciousness is the capacity through which human beings can recognize the common consciousness as an exterior layer or primary degree of self-consciousness, one that results from a deeper, underlying principle that can only be intuited via the higher degree of philosophic self-consciousness. As Coleridge explains, it is on this "immediate" principle, "which dwells in every [… person], and on the original intuition, or absolute affirmation of it (which is likewise in every [… person], but does not in every [… person] rise into consciousness), [that] all the certainty of our knowledge depends" (BL I 243). Thus, the philosophic consciousness is responsible for the human capacity to intuit this principle as that which underlies and gives rise to all degrees of human self-consciousness, and as that which is the fundamental ground of all human knowing.

Coleridge posits this self-intuited principle of self-consciousness as his first epistemological principle, or the postulate of transcendental philosophy. Coleridge's postulate, therefore, consists in the idea of the principle of self-consciousness as it manifests itself in the common consciousness and is detected in the "proofs [… furnished] by its own direction," *and* as it manifests itself in the philosophic consciousness and is connected with its own "master-currents below the surface"; i.e., as that which underlies the human capacity for, and is only found by means of, the philosophic consciousness and its "sacred power of self-intuition" (BL I 242, 241). Thus, as the "most original construction," Coleridge's postulate results from, and is inclusive of the idea of, the "first productive act for the inner sense" whose direction is determined by the freely-willed activity of the philosophic consciousness (BL I 250). As Coleridge proclaims, "The postulate of philosophy and at the same time the test of philosophic capacity, is no other than the heaven-descended know thyself!" (BL I 252).

The principle of self-consciousness, from which Coleridge's intends to "deduce the memory with all the other functions of intelligence," and whose "first position [is] from beyond the memory, and anterior to it," is a necessary condition for the human capacity to *know* as such (BL I 247). This principle, however, is not only the necessary condition and immediate and certain ground, but also that which determines the *form*, of all possible human knowing. As Coleridge explains, "[…] the whole *synthesis* of [… human] intelligence is first formed in and through the self-consciousness," and this

[4] The contemplative nature of the philosophic consciousness is not discussed directly by Coleridge in Chapter 12; however, evidence that the philosophic consciousness consists primarily of this nature is found in Coleridge's broader discussion, especially in respect to the material he quotes from Plotinus (see BL I 240–241: "Should any one interrogate her […] work without words."; "it is not lawful to enquire […] as the eye waits patiently for the rising sun."). Most pertinently, see Coleridge's note, BL I 240: "What then are we to understand? That whatever is produced is an intuition, I silent; and that, which is thus generated, is by its nature a theorem, or form of contemplation; and the birth, which results to me from this contemplation, attains to have a contemplative nature." See also Engell, BL I 240, n. 4 for identification of, and discussion on the difference between, Coleridge's translation and the accepted translation ("and that I, originating from this sort of contemplation, have a contemplative nature").

principle "is the last in [… human] knowing itself, beyond which [… *human beings*] cannot pass" (Ibid.). Furthermore, as indicated above, the principle of self-consciousness "not only claims but necessitates the admission of its immediate certainty, equally for the scientific reason of the philosopher as for the common sense of [… humankind] at large" (BL I 259–260). In respect to the common sense of humankind, or the common consciousness, one can assert, "I know I am because I am," simply meaning that one can be certain of the immediate truth of self-consciousness because one is self-consciousness. In moving beyond this common-sense assertion, however, one must come to recognize self-consciousness not only as an immediate and certain common-sense truth, but also, philosophically, as a principle that provides the ultimate ground and form of all *possible* human knowing. One moves, then, progressively from the simple assertion of the common consciousness to the more complex and abstract assertions of the higher degree of philosophic consciousness: from "I know I am because I am," to "I know I am because I am self-conscious," and finally to "I know in general because I am self-conscious," and moreover, "I can only know in this self-conscious way." Thus, the principle of self-consciousness is the necessary and immediate ground of epistemology[5] for the transcendental philosopher, and it is also the necessary ground mediating all other forms of human knowing.

Moving Toward a Total and Undivided Philosophy

Held in tension with this narrow epistemological argument is Coleridge's more expansive design of constructing a total and undivided philosophy. Coleridge's religious aims are in the background of even his most restrictive philosophical ideas, and thus, his narrow argument is a mere starting point, even if a crucial and necessary one, in relation to his more comprehensive, ultimately religious philosophical goals. Coleridge's work as a transcendental philosopher in Chapter 12 "commences with, and rigidly confines itself within, the subjective," thus restricting itself to only one pole, the subjective or "knowing" pole, of the *two* fundamental "Polar Sciences," the other of which is natural philosophy, which itself must commence with the objective or "being" pole (BL I 281–282). Coleridge writes, "For if all knowledge has, as it were, two poles reciprocally required and presupposed, all sciences must proceed from the one or the other, and must tend towards the opposite as far as the equatorial point in which both are reconciled and become identical" (BL I 255).[6] In accordance with this position, Coleridge begins by establishing the principle of self-consciousness as the first principle of knowing via his narrow argument in transcendental philosophy with the understanding that, from here, his philosophical work would necessarily tend toward the "equatorial point," a point from which philosophy would be required to account not only for the

[5] In Coleridge's words, "a systematic knowledge of our collective KNOWING." See BL I 282.

[6] For another instance of Coleridge's use of the image of the equatorial point, see BL I 282–283. Engell explains that this original image is a favorite for Coleridge to "describe the union of polarities or opposites." See BL I 282, n. 5.

fundamental principle of knowing, but also for the fundamental principle of being. This, of course, would involve metaphysical *as well as* theological explication. As Coleridge writes, "The result of both the sciences, or their equatorial point, would be the principle of a total and undivided philosophy […]. In other words, philosophy would pass into religion, and religion become inclusive of philosophy. We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to end with the absolute I AM. We proceed from the SELF, in order to lose and find all self in God" (BL I 282–283).

Coleridge claims the principle of self-consciousness not only as the certain and immediate first principle of knowing, but also as a persuasive mediate principle in other, not strictly epistemological domains of a total and undivided philosophy. This is because, as a unique kind of absolute, the principle of self-consciousness cannot be discovered in subject or object "taken separately, and consequently, as no other third is conceivable, it must be found in that which is neither subject nor object exclusively, but which is the identity of both" (BL I 271). Coleridge argues, "In this [principle of self-consciousness], and in this alone, object and subject, being and knowing, are identical, each involving and supposing the other" (BL I 273). Moreover, Coleridge identifies the subjective with the infinite and the objective with the finite, concluding that this principle "can be conceived neither as infinite nor finite exclusively, but as the most original union of both" (BL I 280). Because the absolute principle of self-consciousness involves such essential relationalities within itself, it must be understood as dynamic, resulting in "a perpetual self-duplication of one and the same power into object and subject, which presuppose each other, and can exist only as *antitheses*" (BL I 273).

In terms of the two Polar Sciences, the transcendental philosopher, who can demonstrate the principle of self-consciousness as his immediate and certain first principle, must, according to Coleridge, assume this same principle as the absolute ground of nature (BL I 260). Moreover, Coleridge claims that even the natural philosopher "can never pass beyond the principle of self-consciousness" (BL I 285). This is because, Coleridge insists, only in the principle of self-consciousness is there an absolute identity of subject and object, and only in self-consciousness are the principle of being and the principle of knowing "co-inherent and identical" (BL I 285). As such, the principle of self-consciousness is the only absolute principle capable of grounding a reality with both subjective and objective dimensions. "The theory of natural philosophy would then be completed," Coleridge proclaims, "when all nature was demonstrated to be identical in essence with that, which in its highest known power exists in [… humankind] as intelligence and self-consciousness; when the heavens and the earth shall declare not only the power of their maker, but the glory and the presence of their God […]" (BL I 256). The principle of self-consciousness, then, serves as the immediate and certain first principle of transcendental philosophy *and* as a persuasive mediate principle of natural philosophy, making it central to Coleridge's vision for a total and undivided philosophy as the equatorial point of both.

Imagination as the Core Connecting the Finite Self-Consciousness with the Infinite I AM

One crucial component of this total and undivided philosophy, however, is still missing. In an attempt to characterize the essential nature of self-consciousness toward the end of Chapter 12, Coleridge writes, "[W]e may abstract from all *degree*, and for the purpose of philosophic construction reduce it to *kind*, under the idea of an indestructible power with two opposite and counteracting forces […]. The intelligence in the one tends to *objectize* itself, and in the other to *know* itself in the object" (BL I 286). Coleridge claims that the principle of self-consciousness thought of as consisting in this power with these forces necessitates the idea of Imagination (Ibid.).[7] This is because, as Coleridge maintains, "something must be the result of these two forces, both alike infinite, and both alike indestructible; and as rest or neutralization cannot be this result; no other conception is possible, but that the product must be a [… 'third thing'], or finite generation" (BL I 300). Coleridge explains that "this [… 'third thing'] can be no other than an inter-penetration of the counteracting powers, partaking of both" (Ibid.). This one power with its counteracting forces, their interpenetration, and the finite generations that result consist or continually occur "in the living principle and in the process of [… human] self-consciousness" (BL I 299). However, what is key here—indeed, what is the keystone to Coleridge's entire system—is that Imagination is necessary for the finite generations of the principle of self-consciousness to occur. It is the "instrument," or human faculty, that makes possible the interpenetration of the two forces (Ibid.).[8] The human faculty of Imagination is thus necessitated by the nature of the principle of self-consciousness, and it is also a necessary power, or third force, that inheres in human self-consciousness as such.

As the power required by the counteracting forces of the principle of self-consciousness, the position of the faculty of Imagination at the core of Coleridge's total and undivided philosophy is coming into view in this preliminary sense. To build upon this, let us return to the idea of the philosophic consciousness, a secondary degree of self-consciousness, which, then, must be inclusive of all degrees of Imagination. This includes the philosophic aspect of the secondary Imagination, necessary for that first vital step out of the purely contemplative activity of the philosophic consciousness and into the system-building work that begins with the "original construction" that Coleridge posits as the postulate of transcendental philosophy.[9] Indeed, as a synthetic and constructive unifying power, the philosophic Imagination is necessary to generate the crucial links that allow the system to grow and move progressively toward the equatorial point of the total and undivided philosophy, and thus to become progressively more inclusive of broader

[7] In Coleridge's language, if he assumes "such a power as [… his] principle," then he can "deduce from it a faculty," the faculty of Imagination.

[8] Coleridge seems to be referring to Imagination with the term "instrument" here. Coleridge's "to and for whom it is possible" seems to refer to the philosophic and poetic aspects of the secondary Imagination, the capacity for which, unlike the primary Imagination, would not be in everyone alike.

[9] For Coleridge's "most original construction," see BL I 250–252.

metaphysical and theological explication.[10] The philosophic Imagination, then, is at the core of Coleridge's total and undivided philosophy as that which builds the bridges necessary for human knowing to cross over from strictly epistemological beginnings to theological ends. Moreover, the philosophic Imagination is the capacity through which one can come to know the principle of self-consciousness as an absolute principle in *oneself* and in *nature*; come to know nature as intelligence, and thus, "see all things in God"; and come to know that one's own self-consciousness is dependent on "or rather" inheres in the absolute I AM "in whom 'we live, and move, and have our being'" (BL I 285–286, 277–278).[11] The philosophic Imagination is, therefore, the core power connecting the finite self-consciousness with the infinite I AM in relation to human Knowing.

To move beyond this idea of Imagination as a faculty that merely allows finite human beings to construct philosophical systems that are inclusive of theology, the more radical, metaphysical claim is that Imagination is the core power responsible for an ontological connection between the finite and infinite self-consciousnesses.[12] The primary Imagination sustains this ontological connection through the "repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (BL I 304).[13] To elaborate, the finite generations of nature and perception that result from the counteracting forces in the one indestructible power occur through and "in the living principle and […] process of […] self-consciousness" in the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM, and in the temporal repetition of this act of creation through perception in the finite self-consciousness (BL I 299–304). Imagination is the human faculty responsible for these finite generations, and thus, the human faculty or core power responsible for mediating the connection between the eternal act of creation and the temporal repetition of this act through perception. In this context, Coleridge's earlier insight now becomes clearer: the principle of self-consciousness is "the most original union" of the infinite and the finite (BL I 280). "In the existence, in the reconciling, and the recurrence of this contradiction," he writes, "consist the process and mystery of production and life" (BL I 280–281). This primordial and perpetual contradiction of the infinite and finite occurs in the union between the infinite forces of the principle of self-consciousness and the finite generations that result via the eternal act of creation and human perception, and in the overarching union between the infinite I AM and the finite self-consciousness, Imagination being the core power actively sustaining and perpetuating this kind of union as such.

While the primary Imagination, as "the living power and prime Agent of all human perception," sustains a primordial ontological connection by repeating the eternal act of creation in the finite mind through actively perceiving the

[10] This idea of Imagination generating "crucial links" is inspired by the *Biographia*'s conclusion. See BL II 246: "link follows link by necessary consequence."

[11] See Coleridge's note at BL I 277–278. Re Coleridge's biblical quotation, see Acts 17:28.

[12] Here, one shifts from the "knowing" pole to the "being" pole.

[13] Engell notes Sara Coleridge's observation that "and as a repetition […] infinite I AM" was crossed out in a copy of the *Biographia* in which Coleridge had written in the margins. See, BL I 304, n. 3.

"world of sense," the secondary Imagination willfully strives to evolve this connection by re-creating the world philosophically and artistically (as well as morally) in a way that is harmonized with the ideal "world of spirit" (BL I 304).[14] The secondary Imagination contributes its own "mode of […] operation" that "dissolves, diffuses, [and] dissipates" the world of sense as it is given through perception and processed through the common understanding, "in order to re-create" a world that is in harmony with spiritual truths (BL I 304). "[W]here this process is rendered impossible," Coleridge explains, the secondary Imagination "still at all events […] struggles to idealize and to unify" (Ibid.). Working primarily with Reason and Understanding, the philosophic aspect of the secondary Imagination strives to construct and unify philosophical systems on the basis of the spiritual truths gained via self-intuition. The philosophic Imagination is the capacity through which human beings "feel in their own spirits the same instinct, which impels the chrysalis of the horned fly to leave room in its involucrum for antenna yet to come," or the capacity through which human beings see the potential in the world that is given through perception to realize and come to know the spiritual truths of the ideal world in which it subsists (BL I 241–242). The poetic aspect of the secondary Imagination strives to bring "the whole soul of [… the human being] into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity" (BL II 15–16). Thus, instead of constructing philosophical systems that appeal primarily to human Reason and Understanding, the poetic Imagination diffuses its spiritual truths back into the world of sense. In this way, the poetic Imagination strives to reconcile "the idea, with the image"; the "artificial" with the "natural"; "the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects" (BL II 16–17). Thus, the poetic Imagination works to abstract the forms and universal kinds, and re-clothe them, giving them the capacity to "[s]teal access through our senses to our minds" (BL II 17).[15] In both of its aspects—philosophic and poetic—the secondary Imagination is the power striving to mediate and strengthen connections between the human world and the world of spirit, between the human being and God. In this respect, the secondary Imagination is the capacity through which the perceptual connection of the primary Imagination can grow into the spiritual connections that can only be brought about in conjunction with the higher faculties. The secondary Imagination, then, is the highest degree of the core power connecting the finite self-consciousness and

[14] For Coleridge on the "world of sense" and the "world of spirit," see BL I 241–242. I am using these two phrases as representations of the lowest and highest rungs, so to speak; however, I do not mean to imply that primary Imagination is limited to sense perception. As Coleridge maintains, primary Imagination is involved with *all* human perception. Moreover, the primary and secondary Imagination are different degrees of the same power. Consequently, the more commonly active primary degree is not separate from the secondary when it is active, but rather the two degrees of Imagination must somehow be in flux with one another, the primary reaching as far as it can, and the secondary reaching "higher" or "deeper" into the spiritual/ideal world (i.e., tending toward the philosophic), and struggling to draw these "higher" or "deeper" truths back into the physical world where they can be perceived by others (i.e., tending toward the poetic/artistic).

[15] Coleridge expresses these particular characteristics of Imagination via his adaptation of a poem on the soul written by Sir John Davies. See Engell, BL II 17, n. 2.

the infinite I AM, and it is thus responsible for the highest attainable degree of this connection, which is spiritual.

Conclusion

In the *Biographia*, Coleridge's narrow epistemological beginning was only a prelude to his expansive theological ends. Coleridge begins by establishing the principle of self-consciousness as his first epistemological principle, only to end with what he envisioned, in this text, as the keystone to his entire system—the Imagination; which as this paper has sought to demonstrate, is not only necessitated by the very nature of self-consciousness, but is also the core power with the capacity to connect—epistemologically and ontologically—the finite self-consciousness with the infinite I AM. Thus, Imagination is the vital faculty necessary for one to move epistemologically from Coleridge's narrow argument into his more comprehensive vision of a total and undivided philosophy. More importantly, though, the unified power of Imagination is also responsible for ontologically connecting the finite self-consciousness with the infinite I AM in both a universal, primordial sense via the primary degree and a higher spiritual sense via the secondary degree. The paper concludes its close reading of the *Biographia* by pointing toward these higher ontological connections that are only possible via the secondary Imagination. It is by means of the secondary Imagination that the finite human being can wilfully strive toward the infinite I AM—philosophically, poetically, etc.—in search for spiritual truth, to achieve spiritual being.