"Know Thyself" / "Ignore Thyself": Coleridge, Self-consciousness, and the Search for Self-knowledge[1]

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THIS ESSAY EXPLORES COLERIDGE'S LATER THOUGHT on two subjects that intrigued him consistently throughout his life: the processes via which a human being attains—and, then, ideally, progressively expands or advances—consciousness of its "Self" (i.e., "self-consciousness," with the emphasis on "self"); and the different ways in which one can aim, and hope, to "Know Thyself."[2] His ideas about the various nuances involved in the acts and states of self-consciousness and of "Knowing one's Self" developed in interesting ways after the late eighteen-teens, correlating with shifts in his philosophical and theological priorities and beliefs. The ideas presented in this study are ones primarily recorded during Coleridge's last decade, being largely contained within three-hundred-or-so notes that he composed between 1824 and his death.

After exploring the ideas preserved within his "Flycatchers" and other notebooks, this study then demonstrates how they illuminate one of Coleridge's most fascinating (and, apparently, for many critics, most puzzling) poems: "E cœlo descendit, *γνῶθι σεαυτόν*!" ("It came from heaven, *know thyself*!" [?1832/1834]).[3] This short, sharp work is often called "Self-Knowledge"; and at first glance the poem can seem to present contradictory perspectives on that vital issue, the reader being instructed (in the first and final lines, respectively) to "Know thyself" and, then, to "Ignore thyself." When read in the light of the later notebooks, however, "E cœlo descendit […]" is revealed as a simple, clear expression of Coleridge's late-life convictions about what it *really* means to possess self-knowledge, and the means by which a human being can attempt to attain this crucial yet oftentimes elusive wisdom.[4]

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After the publication of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge thought extensively about the nature and role of self-consciousness, dwelling on its relationship to other states of consciousness; its connection to varieties of self-knowledge; and its relative roles within the human "Personal Identity,"[5] both during and after earthly life. By 1826, influenced by the developing "Science of Comparative Anatomy & Physiology," he believed that there were many degrees and kinds of pre- and post-mortem consciousness, manifested as "a

[1] The materials in this essay were first delivered as part of a much longer presentation ("Coleridge's Religious Imaginations") at the Friends of Coleridge Halsway Weekend, 15–17 September 2017. The author's delivery of this current essay at the Coleridge Conference 2018 was enabled by a Faculty Grant from Elizabethtown College, Pennsylvania.

[2] On the complex nature of "Self," see, e.g., CN IV 5280 (f9–f9v), CN V 6673 (f88).

[3] PW I, 2, 1153–1154 (diacritics added, in accordance with most other edns of the poem, and BL I 252).

[4] Coleridge usually indicated his distinct usage of a word by consistently capitalising it. In observation of this procedure, and based upon the practices evident within the later notebooks, the current author normally capitalises *all* of the words that Coleridge consistently capitalised. In this essay, however, in order to accord with *CB* house-style, aside from a few exceptions only the most conventionally observed Coleridgean distinct-use terms are capitalised.

[5] CN IV 5377 (f47).

~~scale~~ graduated Scale of ~~Consciousness~~ ascent from the minimum of Consciousness, […] up to the highest imaginable perfection of Consciousness, that can exist in a *Creature* […]."[6] Considering this scale's application to life on Earth, he also believed that "there must be a first [instance], in which the Consciousness becomes *individual* (i.e. proper Self-consciousness)—," and that this attainment of self-affirmatory consciousness—"*the Form* and indispensible *Mark* of the Individuality"—"takes place *first* in Man."[7]

Coleridge's conviction that only human creatures possess self-consciousness had been widely disseminated by the time he wrote this note, not least in *Aids to Reflection*, which stated that "man alone, of all animals, [was] endued by the Creator with the faculty of *self-consciousness*."[8] The main interest with regard to the abovementioned note of 1826, then, is the idea that creatures experience life via a "Scale" involving degrees of consciousness, at some point upon which the faculty of *self*-consciousness arises, separating humans from other animals.

From 1827, Coleridge wrote prolifically about this ascending scale of consciousness, and the Divine means by which humans may experience states of consciousness different from those they share with other animals. In several complex notes of 1829 and 1830, he explored the relationships between "Consciousness" and "Self-consciousness" in the context of a twofold faculty or power that he called "Percipiency" or "Perceptivity."[9] The notes propose that the most basic state of Consciousness involves, and is defined by, purely spontaneous acts of "Sensation," "Feeling," or "Self-finding" ("*empfindung*").[10] These acts constitute the "Simple" aspect of Perceptivity; and via these acts, the creature enters a process of "feel[ing]" its own state of Being, negotiating the terms and limits of its own physicality—essentially, therefore, establishing itself as a Subject. Significantly, however, being thus preoccupied with instituting its "mere animal subjectivity,"[11] although it obviously *is* an Object in itself, at this very basic degree of consciousness the creature does not yet *recognise* itself as an Object.[12]

Concurrently, or soon after this "Self-finding" begins, the increasingly subjective creature starts to experience the more "Complex," "comparative" aspect of Perceptivity.[13] This aspect involves the operations of "Perception" or "Sense";[14] and, Coleridge explains, it is through acts of Perception that the creature begins to ascertain the existence of, and then to engage dynamically with, Objects external to itself.

When the creature has established itself as a "Feeling" Subject, with physical boundaries, that can achieve rudimentary Perception of and Knowing about

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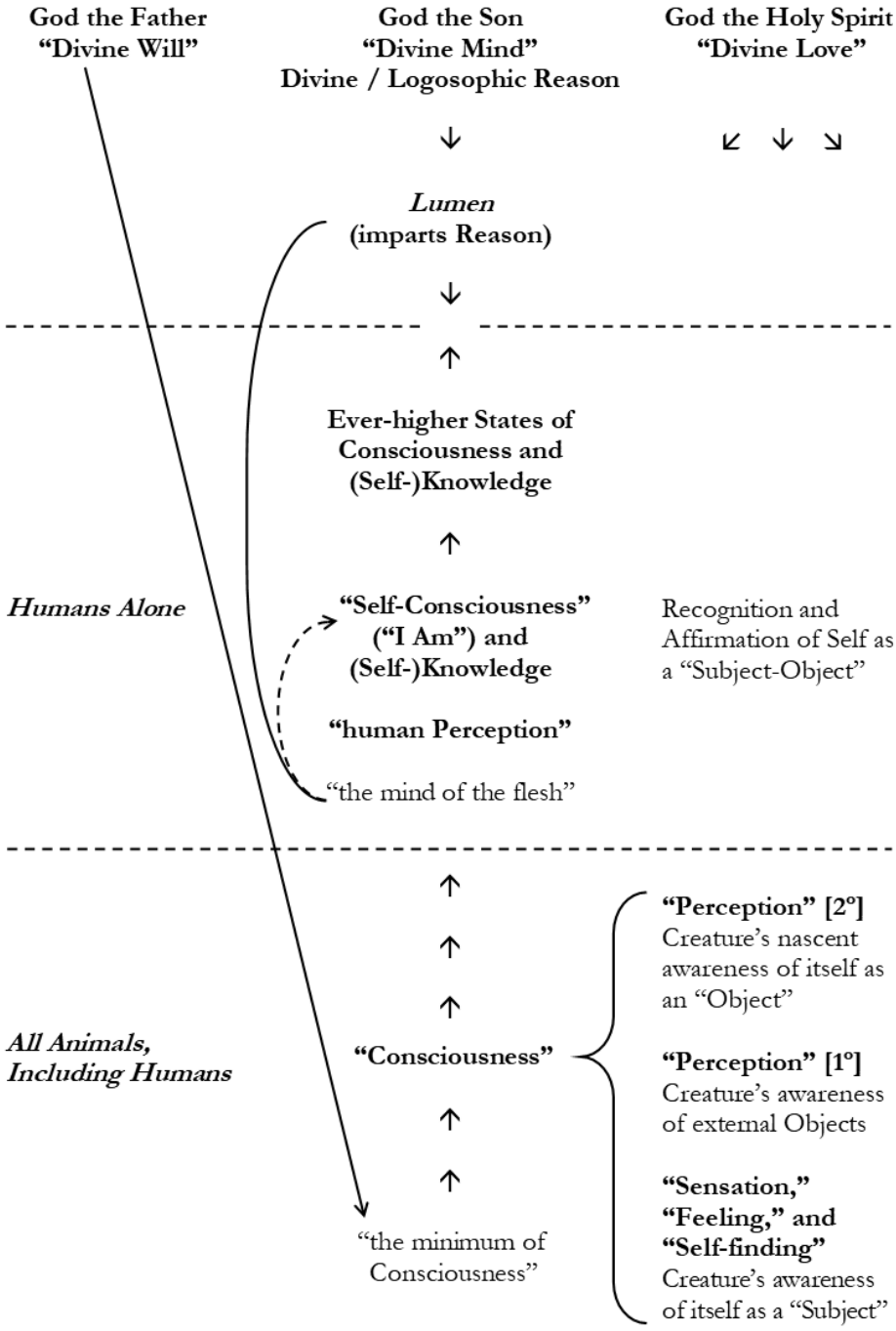
6 CN IV 5377 (f44–f44v).
7 Ibid.
8 AR 10.
9 E.g., CN V 5971 (f34), 5980 (f5v); 5980 (f31).
10 E.g., CN V 5971 (f34), 5964, 5980 (f2–f2v, f31), 6291 (f33v).
11 CN V 6144.
12 E.g., CN V 5964; 5966; 5980 (f2v–f3, f31).
13 CN V 5971 (f34).
14 Ibid.

The "~~scale~~ graduated Scale of ~~Consciousness~~ ascent from the minimum of Consciousness […]," as applicable to life on Earth*



* This diagram is based on the author's reading of multiple notebook entries composed by Coleridge between 1826 and 1834. The quotation is from **26.23**f44v (*CN*4.5377.11th May.1826).

Objects outside of those boundaries (i.e., "*Extroitive*" Knowing[15]), it possesses securely the fundamental, foundational states of Consciousness. Thus firmly planted on the "graduated Scale of […] ascent," it then embarks on the next stage of its development as a conscious being, by starting to turn its acts of Perception towards itself—by beginning (in other words) to negotiate and know *itself* as an Object.

Just after this new and growing level of Perception begins, however, there arises a marked difference in progression between the states and experiences of humans and those of other animals. Essentially, this is because, at a certain point in the developing faculty of self-perception and self-recognition (and, with it, more advanced acts of Being and Knowing), the unique relationship between humans and God becomes evident in the form of a special degree, or even *kind*, of Perception. The later notebooks make clear Coleridge's conviction that this special kind of Perception—named, in *Biographia*, as "human Perception"[16]—arises only in humans because they alone are blessed by "the presence of Reason."[17] For Coleridge, Reason was the key to human beings' status *as* humans; and, in the Ideal states of the earthly individual, Reason essentially modified all other powers and faculties. Perhaps most significantly, it enabled the "finite Will"[18] to be responsible and free, rather than enslaved to sin. In Coleridge's schema, this "finite Will"—possessed by all creatures—is imparted by God the Father, the hypostasis of the Trinity that Coleridge also called the Divine Will. The influence of Divine Reason, though, is imparted to humans alone, via the *Lumen*, the light emanating from the Eternal Light, or *Lux*, of the Divine Mind. This Divine Mind (which Coleridge also called the "Supreme" Mind, Reason, or Intelligence) is the hypostasis known as God the Son, or the Logos. Essentially, Coleridge held that the "down-shining" Light of Logosophic Reason "influence[s]," "irradiat[es]," and "potentiates" the *φρονημα σαρκος* ("mind of the flesh") that is contained within each human being's "Animal" aspect.[19] This "potenziati[ng]" "Presence" of Logosophic Reason engenders within each individual human "that dim apprehension, that bodement, of itself" as an "I Am."[20] The innate presence and influence of Divine Reason thus draws the *general* sense of Perception to the *special* level of "human Perception"; and through these divinely activated "intuitions"[21] the human being is raised-up into higher forms of consciousness than those it shares with other animals. The gradually dawning state of *self*-consciousness having been brought into existence by Logosophic Reason, the individual human is thus set on the road to becoming *fully* aware and *consciously* cognisant of itself as an Object as well as a Subject,

15 CN V 5980 (f3v).
16 BL I 304.
17 E.g., CN V 5493 (f61v).
18 E.g., CN V 5555 (f31v, f39v), 6400 (f63), 6654 (f41v).
19 CN V 6482, 5493 (f61v), 6291 (f33–f33v). On the human being's "Animal 'I'" (and its relationship, within the "triple Ichheit," to the "Human 'I'" and the "Spiritual 'I'"), see Suzanne E. Webster, *Body and Soul in Coleridge's Notebooks, 1827–1834: "What is Life?"* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), *passim*.
20 CN V 6110 (f3), CN IV 5360 (f42v), CN V 5493 (f61v), 5980 (f2v–f3v).
21 E.g., CN V 5493 (f61v), 5556 (f40–f40v).

and to freely affirming itself as a "Subject-Object."[22] In the context of the "graduated Scale of […] ascent from the minimum of Consciousness," God's incomprehensible gifting of Reason thus gives a human being the power to attain and embody the "first instance […] in which the Consciousness becomes *individual* (i.e. proper Self-consciousness)—."[23]

In so having their consciousness raised-up from a purely "Animal" state by the Logosophic Reason, humans are the only aspect of creation to be made "in [God's] own image."[24] As intimated in *Biographia* (and explained fully in later notes), Coleridge believed that this is because each individual's mysterious attainment and, then, gradually intensifying development of self-affirmatory consciousness actively mirrors and continuously involves the eternal, creative urge by which God engenders the emergence and existence of His *own* Self or Personëity. God's eternal act of "self-affirmation" and "Self creation" was first explicitly divulged in time and space when He declared to Moses, "I AM THAT I AM," and instructed the prophet to "say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you."[25] Basically, Coleridge believed that humans are made in God's image because the self-affirming hypostasis of the triune God results from the relationship between the Will of the Father and the co-eternal Reason of the Son (the Logos), and God made Reason operate similarly within humans: i.e., the "Presence" of Divine (and thus, concurrently, human) Reason enables the human Will to recognise and affirm the individual's state of Being as both a Subject and an Object—as an "I Am."

In the majority of humans, the ability to freely recognise and declare, "I Am," is "the ground & form of all other knowlege."[26] Self-consciousness was the base from which the individual could develop and cultivate mutually-enriching knowledge of its self and other Objects; therefore, it was key to the potential for experiencing higher states of consciousness and progressively more-advanced and -original modes of Perception, Knowing, and Being. Moreover (Coleridge believed), in the contexts of earthly life, at the zenith of the "graduated Scale of […] ascent" the individual could actually become open to the direct, rather than only the reflected, presence of Logosophic Reason. Not least, this direct communion with the Divine could engender the individual's advanced ability to recognise connections, and bridge gaps, between its self and Objects of the world around it (material and otherwise). Ideally, such individuals would then be able to make these connections clear to those less able to perceive them. In notes written between 1827 and 1832,

[22] E.g., CN IV 5276 (f8), 5280 (f9). (See also 5280 [f9–f9v]: "[… . F]or the human ~~Subject~~ 'I Am' ~~when~~ as known in the act of Self reflection, is expressed in the formula, I affirm myself—*Ipse* me pono ['I posit myself']—the *I* representing the Subject, & the *myself* the *Object*, ~~&~~ while the E*qui*, or Sum ['I Am'], is the Identity of both /.") The role, in this process, of the "primary IMAGINATION" (BL I 304) is addressed in Webster, "Coleridge's Religious Imaginations." For Coleridge's belief in an additional, higher level of "Subject-Object" relations within humans, see Webster, *Body*, 18, 165.

[23] CN IV 5377 (f44v). Among many texts, other discussions of Coleridge's thought on Divine and human Reason can be found in Mary Anne Perkins, *Coleridge's Philosophy: The Logos as Unifying Principle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

[24] Genesis 1.27; e.g., CN V 6851.

[25] CN V 6355; Exodus 3.14 (qtd, e.g., CN V 5556 [f40–f40v]).

[26] CN V 6474 (f10–f10v).

Coleridge attributed these advanced acts of gap-bridging to various advanced aspects of the faculty of Imagination, aspects he identified as "philosophic," "moral," "constructive," poetic, "pure," and "higher": the "symbolic Power."[27] Building on the synthesising acts between Subject and Object *within* the human being (i.e., the acts that create the self-conscious individual in the first place), these advanced acts of Imagination explore, diffuse and, then, rearrange one's existing perceptions and knowledge of Objects—the matter of one's "accustomed imagination,"[28] including *one's self*—so they can be more-fully comprehended, given fresh life, and known anew.[29] If an individual progressed up the "graduated Scale" in this way, they could be seen as fulfilling *further* their vital symbolic existence of being made in God's image, because the actions of the higher aspects of Imagination could be interpreted as echoes of the acts of creation that God engendered when He externalised His own creative powers. Specifically (Coleridge explained), the triune God engaged His Will and Reason in the creative act of defining Himself as "the great I AM";[30] then, He built on this, in time and space, by uttering (or "outer-ing") His Will and creative powers through His Logosophic Word—beginning with "Let there be light"[31]—in order to forge and organise the material and non-material universe. In a symbolic echo of this Divine creativity, an individual human could build upon and develop its own self-consciousness and self-knowledge to produce progressively more advanced Logosophically inspired expressions and manifestations of Being and Knowing, including acts of creativity.

The potential for unfiltered Logosophic inspiration, and higher forms of expression, was bestowed upon all humans. However, self-consciousness and, with it, increasingly greater knowledge of one's self and other aspects of the universe, did *not* develop and was *not* fulfilled equally in all. Between 1826 and 1829, Coleridge explained that this is because the intensity of one's self-development, re levels of consciousness and self-knowledge, ultimately depends upon one's relationship with God.[32]

Essentially, Coleridge believed that self-consciousness, and the faculty of Reason that creates the capacity not only for that self-consciousness but also for other acts of free Will, are gifts given by God as part of His eternal attempt to (re)unite with His fallen human creation. At the Fall, however, God determined that (unlike other animals) mankind would no longer simply receive His gifts completely freely; instead, postlapsarian humans could benefit fully from His gifts *only* if they made concerted, "Personal"[33] efforts to (re)gain

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[27] E.g. CN V 6029 (f18v), 6306 (f76v); 5635 (f33v); 5775; 6301; 6291 (f33); 6670: see also 6615.
[28] CN V 6374 (f26v).
[29] Cf. BL I 304, on the "secondary" Imagination. (The relationship between the "accustomed imagination" and the "primary IMAGINATION" of *Biographia* is explored in Webster, "Coleridge's Religious Imaginations." If the reader desires more information, they should contact the author at websterse@etown.edu.)
[30] BL II 247.
[31] Genesis 1.3.
[32] For Coleridge's thought on how one's relationship with God effects, and is effected by, the correlative dynamic between one's Animal and Spiritual "I"s, see Webster, *Body*, *passim*.
[33] E.g., CN V 5530 (f65v).

awareness of, and engage in reciprocal interactions with, Him.[34] Therefore, God initiates the process of (re)connection with each individual by Willing into existence their initial, foundational state of self-consciousness, and He also guides the early stages, operations, and growth of this special state. However, God desires that, eventually, the *development* of self-consciousness must involve *conscious* acts of Will on the part of the individual, each human being striving to progress up the "graduated Scale of […] ascent" by engaging in a deliberate, Reason-led quest for mutually enriching knowledge of Objects, both within and outside of its self. Only by undertaking these freely Willed acts of Knowing can the individual eventually reconnect with the ultimate Object of contemplation: the God in whose image it is made.

Coleridge felt strongly that God wants this process to happen in every human: He wants us all to commune directly and consciously with Logosophic Reason; to have access—during *and* after earthly life—to states of consciousness ever-higher in "quantity and quality"; and thus, consequentially, to rediscover our status as "sons[, or children,] of God."[35] If an individual is to be worthy of being made in God's image, then, in exchange for the gift of self-consciousness, as soon as it is able it must use that faculty to forge a personal, *consciously Willed* relationship with Him. Specifically, the individual must employ all of its Reason-led faculties and powers towards becoming, and *knowing itself as*, a responsible, *human* self. Then, this self-conscious, self-affirming being must cultivate a freely Willed, fully conscious desire and decision to acknowledge, seek out, and make a connection with its Creator. Finally, having made this Reason-led connection, the individual must take the leap of faith and submit its self to the Creator's Will and Reason: as is said to God in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Will be done."[36] The individual must thus ultimately "pass out of the Self," and offer that self back to God.[37] Essentially, therefore, through this process the individual develops increasing self-knowledge to the end that it is willing to "sacrific[e]"[38] that sense of self-sufficiency, and acknowledge that God is the creator and facilitator not only of all its self-knowledge, but also of the capacities that constitute this knowledge. In effect, Coleridge asserts that to "know thy God," "my Self," as the main Object, must be replaced by "my God."[39]

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[34] E.g., CN V 5554 (f11v).
[35] CN IV 5377 (f46v); e.g., John 1.12, Galatians 3.26.
[36] Matthew 6.10, Luke 11.2; e.g., CN V 6474 (f7v–f11), 5493 (f61v), 6652, 6392 (f50, f52).
[37] CN V 5530 (f65v).
[38] Ibid.
[39] For "know thy God," see "E cœlo descendit […]," l.10; for more on the idea expressed in this sentence, see Webster, *Body*, 209. To put this complex concept another way: Coleridge said that "All knowledge rests on the coincidence of an object with a subject" (BL I 252). He believed that, at its inception, an individual human is a (minimally conscious) Subject in relation to the Absolute Object, God. Divine Reason then enables the individual "I" (the Subject) to know "its Self" (the Object) and thus become a different, new, *whole* "Self" (a "Subject-Object," or "I Am": see above, fns 2, 22). This "I Am" is thus a new, *self*-conscious Subject in relation to the Absolute Object. In an Ideal context, when the individual has sufficiently developed its own state as a "Subject-Object," then, in its concurrent state as a discrete Subject in relation to God, that individual should focus, consciously, on reinstating God to His rightful position as the ultimate, Absolute Object of contemplation.

By engaging in this process, said Coleridge, the individual was seeking higher reciprocal knowledge of its self and other Objects through religious, rather than simply philosophical, modes of Perception, Knowing, and contemplation.[40] It was recognising, crucially, that self-consciousness and the state of "Knowing Thyself" are means to a greater, religious and spiritual end, rather than ends in themselves. However, as Coleridge frequently acknowledged (with dismay), in our postlapsarian state of Being, recognising this correct frame of development is an Ideal situation. Although each human "I Am" holds the capacity for ever-higher levels of self-knowledge, animalistic urges can too-easily disrupt its spiritualising quest, marooning the individual within an unprofitable iteration of "Knowing Thyself." If overly preoccupied with knowing itself as the Object, the self can forget, or be unwilling, to limit this pursuit and move on to substantial conscious knowledge of other Objects. Bogged-down in the "I Am," the individual is essentially infected by a negative type of self-love—a narcissistic selfishness that Coleridge called "the epidemic disease of Mankind."[41] When thus unable, or unwilling, to progress from a self-absorbed, self-centred iteration of "Knowing Thyself," the individual simultaneously thwarts its development of self-knowledge, and its "Progressions God-ward."[42] This situation, in turn, bodes ill for the individual's experience of a blesséd state in the life after earthly death—what Coleridge called the "proper Humanity" of their "FUTURE *Self*."[43]

In Coleridge's opinion, unprofitable self-knowledge was always ultimately divorced from the admission that consciousness of one's self depends completely upon God, His gift of Reason, and His desire that humans use their Reason-led Will—their *free* Will—to forge a relationship with Him. Coleridge believed that such unprofitable iterations of "Knowing Thyself" could arise, and be manifested, in many different ways. In some, the absence of relations with God was not a deliberate aim.[44] In others, however, apparently "rational" pursuits of knowledge *consciously* lacked the goal of a personal relationship with God, thus inevitably thwarting the individual's attempts to develop its states of self-knowledge. In Coleridge's view, while some such situations were engendered by positively malign motivations,[45] in most cases the epistemological framework that guided the individual's thought was the problem. He also observed that these problematic frameworks could usually be assigned to one of three main groups or categories. The first (perhaps the most definitive and easy to identify) completely denied the existence of any type of spiritual force or presence. The second (more complex) held that while a

[40] E.g., CN V 5529–5530; 5554–5556; 5489 (f60v), "Religion […] Religion."
[41] CN V 6673 (f88v); cf. 6444. For Coleridge's comments on the *positive* type of self-love—the "Self-*interest*" and self-respect that Jesus taught as being essential to the process of loving and communing with other Objects (namely "thy neighbour" [Matthew 22.34–40]; God; and, in turn, one's post-mortem "Personal Identity")—see, e.g., CN V 6144 (f27v–f28), 6673 (f88v–f89), 6022.
[42] CN V 6847 (f55).
[43] CN V 6847 (f55), 6134; 6144 (f28), 6394 (f54–f55), 6669 (f87).
[44] E.g., CN V 6028 (f18), which alludes to the stasis that can result from accumulating knowledge merely for the purpose of saying, or showing, how much one knows.
[45] E.g., CN V 6244 (f74v), "It is a sore […] in God"; 5555 (f26v).

spiritual force or presence *does* exist, it is not a "Personal" force, and so humans cannot have a personal relationship with it. Finally, the third category maintained a reductive sense of the idea that "The proper Study of Mankind is Man,"[46] holding that the quest to "Know Thyself" should entail reciprocal development of knowledge in all realms *except* that concerning the creator of one's self-conscious Being (so, basically, "presume not God to scan"[47]). For Coleridge, epistemological frameworks like these effectively involved "Knowlege for the sake of Knowlege";[48] and he identified such frameworks as the shortcoming of many sciences, philosophies, and "theological scheme[s]."[49] Interestingly, however, whether an epistemological framework was truly condemnable depended, for him, upon whether or not it had developed before the advent of Christianity.[50]

These issues, and the danger of becoming mired in a reductive state in which self-consciousness and "Knowing Thyself" is "the end," rather than the means to the greater end of reunion with God, are addressed within "E cœlo descendit, *γνῶθι σεαυτόν*!":

> Γνῶθι σεαυτόν!—and is this the prime
> And heaven-sprung adage of the olden time!—
> Say, canst thou make thyself?—Learn first that trade;—
> Haply thou mayst know what thyself had made.
> What hast thou, Man, that thou dar'st call thine own?—
> What is there in thee, Man, that can be known?—
> Dark fluxion, all unfixable by thought,
> A phantom dim of past and future wrought,
> Vain sister of the worm,—life, death, soul, clod—
> Ignore thyself, and strive to know thy God!

This wonderfully bracing effusion is one of Coleridge's best after 1830. Each heroic couplet packs a provocative punch, veritably demanding that its reader conduct an immediate, thorough self-evaluation. Sometimes, this demand is more powerful in the manuscript version (titled "⟨*Know Thyself.*⟩ E cœlo descendit, Γνῶθι Σεαυτον! Juvenal."): one may wish, in particular, that Coleridge had not toned-down ll.3–4 in the published text![51] Both versions of that couplet convey the same message, though, the significance of which is only intensified when read alongside the later notes. These lines acknowledge that humans *are* creative beings. However, as well as being unable to "make [it]self" (1.3) in the most obvious, general sense of "creating its very earthly

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[46] Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, "Epistle II" (l.2), 2nd edn (the first edn reads, "The only Science of Mankind is *Man*"): cf. CN IV 4931 (f94v–f94).
[47] Pope l.1; cf. CN IV 5377 (f45).
[48] CN IV 5132, and nn.
[49] CN V 6550 (f30v).
[50] E.g., CN V 6550 (f30v), 6669 (f86–f86v), 5814 (f39–f39v), 5868 (f72v–f73).
[51] The manuscript reads, "Say rather, MAKE thyself! First learn *that* trade! / Well may'st thou know⟨, Man! ⟩ what ~~thou~~ thyself hast made!" (PW II, 2, 1368).

existence," a human cannot "make its *self* " in the more specialised, specific sense of "the self" as "the human 'I Am.'" The individual's perception and knowledge of its "I Am"-ness is not an original act of creation on its part, because that self-consciousness depends upon the power of "human Perception," the special, Logosophically infused gift of "*self* making." Although initially unaware of this gift and its giver, the individual must not *remain* unaware, or (as the poem reveals) the outcome is dire. Should an individual think, narcissistically, that it had created its sense of its "self"—its "I Am"—through its own ruminations, and it did not consciously anchor its search for self-knowledge to the rock of the triune God, then it would be doomed to a life of undirected "thought," unmoored and in flux—trapped in a phantasmagorical state with no true knowledge of its origin, present purpose, or future state of Being (ll.7, 8). That individual would, in effect, be no better than the worms (l.9), conducting its explorations of life through mere "Self-finding" and the most basic levels of Perception. Essentially, if an individual pursued its "Love of Wisdom"[52] as if the Logos had not given it Reason and, subsequently, become Incarnate to tell it explicitly how to reconnect with its Creator, then that individual would never truly "Know its Self." In turn, rather than being Idea-conveying symbols, that individual's creative acts of Perceiving, Knowing, and Being would be nothing more than irrational, hollow, "Fancy"-full signs.[53]

With this reading of the whole poem in mind, the somewhat-confusing first couplet speaks more clearly. Essentially, Coleridge denotes, here, that if his readers do not interpret and comprehend the instruction, "Γνῶθι σεαυτόν! " ("Know thyself!"), as the means to reunion with their triune God, then they are upholding the adage in accordance only with its ancient "Pagan" contexts—contexts not clarified by the Light of the "one only true Religion."[54] This is because "the olden time" (l.2) that spawned the adage was not the newly Christianising world of Juvenal: although Juvenal's "Satire XI" popularised the adage during the second century CE, the phrase "*γνῶθι σεαυτόν*" originated at least six centuries earlier, in pre-Christian Greece or Egypt. As an individual living in the "Christian Era," then, Coleridge's reader was duty-bound to recalibrate the meaning of the adage; and if they did not, they were willingly ignoring the fact that only by "Ignor[ing] thyself, and striv[ing] to know thy God" (l.10) can one gain ever-greater self-knowledge and *truly* "Know Thyself."

The poem, then, is not as "profoundly pessimistic" as Stephen Prickett thinks.[55] It is true: as J. C. C. Mays observes (with reference to *Biographia Literaria*),

> [i]t might seem that[, in the poem,] C is rejecting totally the maxim he so

[52] CN IV 5132.
[53] For "Fancy," see BL I 305; on symbols and signs, see, e.g., CN V 6735 (f28v).
[54] AR 10; CN V 5868 (f70) (cf. 5736 [f57], 6364, 6851).
[55] Stephen Prickett, *Coleridge and Wordsworth: The Poetry of Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970), 177.

> often cited as the basis of all philosophy and knowledge[, … including] knowledge of God: [i.e.,] "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."[56]

Mays does not appear to hold this opinion of the poem himself: like the current author, he suggests that it "might be taken as an attempt to convey the uselessness of pursuing human knowledge without at the same time aiming at the divine, the latter achievable only with the help of the Christian tradition […]."[57] Sadly, however, the misreading of the poem as "pessimistic," and as a sign of Coleridge's despair, is one that clouds most other published assessments of the piece.[58] In the light of the later notebooks—sources which still receive too little substantial consideration, given their import to understanding the later Coleridge—such misinterpretation is a little frustrating. As we have seen, in "E cœlo descendit, *γνῶθι σεαυτόν*!" Coleridge does *not* reject the Divinely-desired human state of "Knowing Thyself." Rather, this poem reiterates, in a brilliantly defiant, more provocative way, the Ideal expressed in *Biographia* and, subsequently, in numerous later notes: that we must begin by knowing our "SELF"; then, in time, we should aim to "los[e]" or "Ignore" that self in order that we can focus on knowing our God and, in turn, our *true* self.[59] Self-consciousness and "Knowing Thyself" were thus of immense import to Coleridge, but not as ends in themselves: ultimately, the Object of one's knowledge, affection, and devotion should not be one's *self*, but, rather, *God*—for "God only is the End, and all else but Means."[60]

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[56] PW I, 2, 1153 (qtg BL I 283).
[57] PW I, 2, 1153–1154.
[58] E.g.: H. N. Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry* (1949; repr., New York: Columbia UP, 1956), 3: 326–327 (qtd, negatively, in James D. Boulger, *Coleridge as Religious Thinker* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1961], 82–83); I. A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1960), 49–51; Walter Jackson Bate, *Coleridge* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 179 (qtd, positively, in Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* [Chicago: Chicago UP, 1983], 97–98); Rolf Breuer, "Coleridge's Concept of Imagination […]," *Poetic Knowledge: Circumference and Centre*, eds Roland Hagenbüchle and Joseph T. Swann (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1980), [42–50,] 49; Martin Greenberg, *The Hamlet Vocation of Coleridge and Wordsworth* (Iowa City: Iowa UP, 1986), 89–90; James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: […]* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 52–53.
[59] CN V 6275 (f10).
[60] CN V 6394 (f55).