

‘Time + Space’: Coleridge’s Phenomenological Organicism in ‘Theory of Life’

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IN A LETTER TO THOMAS POOLE, written 16 March 1801, Samuel Taylor Coleridge boasted that he had ‘not only completely extricated the notions of Time, and Space; but [also to] have overthrown the doctrine of Association, as taught by Hartley, and with it all the irreligious metaphysics of modern Infidels’ (CL II 706). This compact but complex claim speaks to several of Coleridge’s lifelong preoccupations, but it especially points to his efforts to find a way out of Cartesian dualism. His reference to David Hartley, author of *Observations on Man, His Duty, His Frame, and His Expectations* (1749), signals the long line of philosophers and philosophical positions with which he engaged as he tried to formulate a theologically sound solution that would overturn the Cartesian separation of mind and matter. Beginning with British materialists, such as Hartley and his admirer Joseph Priestley, moving to Immanuel Kant and the *Naturphilosophen*, and never quite abandoning Baruch Spinoza, Coleridge explored a range of ontological systems as he tried to find a non-Cartesian schema that would preserve the sanctity of the human soul and maintain a fundamental connection between God and his creation, while also preserving a distinction amongst the three entities.¹

His obsession to reconcile unity and multiteity drove not only his lifelong philosophical quest, but also his evolving theory of organicism. Since the rise of new historicism in the latter part of the twentieth century, it has become passé to take Coleridge’s organicism seriously, in part because it is, according to some critics, ‘a purely conceptual unity [that is] achieved at the expense of experience’.² In general, new historicist critics believe that Coleridge’s organicism, along with most other Romantic aesthetic concepts, is based on transcendental principles that do not take sociopolitical realities into account and, therefore, functions as an ideological obfuscation of his commitment to hegemonic hierarchies. In contrast to this position, I contend that the model of organicism that Coleridge advances in ‘Theory of Life’, his unpublished collaboration with James Gillman, offers a paradigm of relationality that is well worth revisiting.³ Written in the second decade of the nineteenth century, when the question of life was at the forefront of philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic discourse, ‘Theory of Life’ began as a collaborative effort to help Gillman, one of Coleridge’s physician friends, win the 1816 Royal College of Surgeons’ annual Jacksonian Prize competition. Gillman was to write about contemporary accounts and treatments of scrofula, while Coleridge was charged with writing the history of the treatment of, beliefs surrounding, and

¹ Richard Berkeley argues that Coleridge’s engagement with Spinoza establishes a ‘pattern of trying to reconcile Spinoza’s reason with his own faith’ (‘The Providential Wreck: Coleridge and Spinoza’s Metaphysics’, *European Romantic Review* 17 [2006]: 463 [457–75]). This pattern, in my view, is not exclusive to Spinoza, but represents Coleridge’s more comprehensive attempt to reconcile his faith with non-Cartesian ontologies and epistemologies.

² Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 38.

³ See ‘Theory of Life’ in *SWF* I 481–557, cited throughout in parenthetical references to the first part of *SWF*.

ideas about it. However, the public controversy between Abernethy and Lawrence about the source and nature of life, which occurred around the time Coleridge was writing his essay, contributed to its expansion beyond a history of scrofula into a full-length treatise.⁴ In my view, it contains the most thoroughgoing discussion of his organicism and, as such, it reveals his deep commitment to an organicism based on relationality. Furthermore, according to Coleridge's cosmology, these relationships structure the animate and inanimate world. It is a model that could serve as a metaphor to replace the Cartesian consciousness that pervaded the eighteenth and nineteenth century and still dominates conceptions of mind and life today. Analysing 'Theory of Life' from a phenomenological perspective, I argue that Coleridge, contrary to Jerome McGann's claim, takes experience into account, particularly his sense that the world is simultaneously multiple and one.

Despite the title 'Theory of Life', Coleridge's treatise includes an account of how the phenomenal world comes into being. Moreover, his verbal and notational descriptions of the Newtonian forces emerging from the liaisons between time and space reveal an organicism characterized by relationality so deep that it comprises the very fabric of the inanimate universe. His notations, when understood through the lens of twenty-first-century dynamical systems theory, show how Coleridge envisioned even non-living aspects of the world as ongoing and active processes. Originating in 1885 but undergoing significant transformations from the 1970s through to today, dynamical systems theory combines geometrical, topographical, and numeric analytical methods to predict (or rather, attempt to predict) systems generally considered chaotic or unpredictable.⁵ Emerging from 'fruitful encounters among diverse scientific groups', it developed, sometimes sporadically, as an 'adoption, and possibly adaptation of a "dynamical systems approach" to the study of complex behaviors'.⁶ As an interdisciplinary methodology that tackles similar problems as Coleridge while also innovating new methods and tools of analysis, dynamical systems theory has rich resonance with science in the Romantic period, especially its goal to understand and predict, theoretically at least, phenomena that have baffled traditional approaches.⁷ In the 1980s, it was hailed as a solution to the thorny problem—and Coleridge's bugbear—of human will because it ostensibly 'provides a mechanism that allows for free will

⁴ Abernethy delivered his lectures on *Mr. Hunter's Theory of Life* in 1814 and 1815, and Lawrence gave his lecture, titled *An Introduction to Comparative Anatomy and Physiology* in 1816 as part of the Hunterian lecture series at the Royal College. These were followed by the publication of Abernethy's *Introductory Lectures, exhibiting Some of Mr. Hunter's Opinion respecting Life and Diseases, delivered before the Royal College of Surgeons* in 1815 and Lawrence's *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and the Natural History of Man: Delivered at the Royal College of Surgeons* in 1819 (Sharon Ruston, "Natural Enemies in Science, as Well as in Politics": Romanticism and Scientific Conflict, *Romanticism* 11 [2005]: 71 [70–83]).

⁵ Philip Holmes, 'A Short History of Dynamical Systems Theory: 1885–2007', in *History of Mathematics*, ed. Jeremy Gray and Vagn Lundsgaard Hansen (EOLSS Publications, 2010), 116 (115–38).

⁶ David Aubin and Amy Dahan Dalmedico, 'Writing the History of Dynamical Systems and Chaos: Longue Durée and Revolution, Disciplines and Cultures', *Historia Mathematica* 29.3 (1 August 2002): 308 (273–339), <https://doi.org/10.1006/hmat.2002.2351>.

⁷ Given that dynamical systems theory has been applied, in various ways, to nonlinear events that seem to have a 'few degrees of freedom', thus making them seemingly unpredictable, it makes sense that some scientists refer to it as 'chaos theory' (Aubin and Dahan Dalmedico, 'Dynamical Systems and Chaos', 282). For more about the sociohistorical development of dynamical systems theory, see Aubin and Dahan Dalmedico or Holmes.

within a world governed by deterministic law'.⁸ Consequently, in the twenty-first century, it has been adopted by neurophenomenologists and other philosophers of mind to help explain how consciousness, which Coleridge associated with freewill, can arise from mental operations that scientists now agree are material in origin.

Because dynamical systems theory seeks to articulate and understand complex phenomena that seemingly transcend the mechanical laws of physics, it provides an illuminating paradigm for interrogating and recuperating Coleridge's ideas about organicism. His explanations and notations, influenced by German transcendentalism, may make as little sense to a twenty-first-century reader as dynamical differential equations make to nonexperts, yet the conceptual similarities are more important than the content because they are legible enough to provide new insight into Romantic organicism. Where some critics see organicism as so marked by 'self-contradiction, abstraction, and evasiveness' that it has become an empty critical concept, I view it as important and relevant in the twenty-first century.⁹ It is crucial to recollect that Romantic organicism emerged from a desire to 'explain how all phenomena of nature are organically related'.¹⁰ Coleridge and his contemporaries were interested, often in direct response to the hegemonic belief in mind-matter dualism, in the relationships amongst the beings and objects that populate the earth. Coleridge's vision of relationality, which underwrites his model of organicism, has much to teach readers about conceptualizing, valuing, and interacting with the world. Coleridge's organicism also reminds twenty-first-century readers that rather than seeing ourselves as Cartesian subjects who are separate from and superior to physicality—be that the environment, our bodies, or other living beings—we can conceptualize the world and ourselves differently and experience ourselves as parts of a larger whole that is structured by relationships in which each part mutually depends on each other and on the whole.

Cartesianism and Contemporary Criticism

Hartley's and Priestley's ideas initially appealed to Coleridge because they advanced radically new hypotheses about cognition that bridged the gap between mind and spirit by positing their imbrication with each other and with the world. They were even more appealing because, unlike thinkers such as Julien Offray de la Mettrie and other French *philosophes*, neither man embraced atheism. Rather, they found ways to reconcile their ideas within a Christian framework. Their ideas distinguished them from the mass of other thinkers because, from the seventeenth century forward, most Christians accepted Rene Descartes' separation of spirit from the gross material world. This professed solution accounted for the soul's ostensible immortality and God's eternal nature as well as provided a link between the human and the divine. According

⁸ James P. Crutchfield et al., 'Chaos', *Scientific American* 255.6 (1986): 57 (46–57).

⁹ David Fairer, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790–1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 28.

¹⁰ Raimonda Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1985), 141.

to Cartesian dualism, God exists as an immaterial substance, which differentiates him from the material world, that is, nature. Dualists claim that the physical world is composed of inert, lifeless matter. Likewise, under Cartesianism the human mind, or soul, is also immaterial, thus linking it to God. Consequently, Cartesian Christians consider the physical world, including the body, as degraded and inimical to salvation.

Coleridge found this stance repugnant. In 1819, he delivered a lecture that critiqued Cartesian physics for reducing the natural world to ‘merely mechanical laws’; he charged Descartes with being ‘the first man who made a direct division between man and nature, the first man who made nature utterly lifeless and Godless’ (*LHP* II 565). Explaining physical phenomena in terms of mechanistic operations—the action of springs, pulleys, tubes, and so forth that are set into motion by external forces—Cartesianism evacuates nature of life, which seems to be one of its essential characteristics. Without the immaterial principle, or souls, to motivate them, plants and animals are reduced to automata that move mechanically through what H. W. Piper, quoting Wordsworth, called ‘a universe of death’ in which living creatures become machines or tools subject to external forces.¹¹ Even worse, however, this philosophy committed a more heinous theological solecism by removing God from the world that he created. In consequence, Cartesianism describes nature in ways that are contrary to most people’s lived experience of it as teeming with biological and, for some, spiritual life.¹² Because Hartley formulated a system that integrated humankind into the physical world, seeing it as its native home and part of God’s divine plan, he offered Coleridge a starting point for thinking about these issues in more phenomenologically attuned ways that enabled him to formulate an organicism that restores vitality to nature because it ‘suggests a metaphysical yet experientially rooted sense of the supernatural’.¹³ It helped Coleridge to theorize how nature can be both vital and imbued with the divine.

Of course, Hartley’s and Priestley’s materialist approaches also gainsay phenomenological experience because they deny freewill. For this reason, Coleridge eventually rejected them, emphatically denouncing Hartley in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) by claiming that ‘[s]o wide indeed is the chasm between this gentleman’s philosophical creed and mine, that so far from being able to join hands, we could scarce make our voices intelligible to each other’

¹¹ H. W. Piper, *The Active Universe: Pantheism and the Concept of Imagination in the English Romantic Poets* (London: University of London, Athlone, 1962), 6. See also *The Prelude* (1805), bk.13.141 and Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature*, 142.

¹² Francisco Varela, Eleanor Rosch, and Evan Thompson make an analogous argument about models of cognition that fail to consider people’s context-dependent knowledge when theorizing how cognition works. Ignoring lived experience, it discounts, they claim, the ‘bodily and social history’ that percipients gain as they perceive and experience their world (Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* [Cambridge: MIT, 1991], 150). Similarly, Cartesian accounts of nature ignore the phenomenological experience of nature, which discloses itself to most people as active and full of organisms that are largely self-motivated and sensitive to their surroundings. Not coincidentally, phenomenology inspires both Varela and his coauthors’ quarrel with cognitivism as well as my reading of Coleridge’s organicism.

¹³ Peter Cheyne, “‘Wild Activity of Thoughts’: Associationism and the Idea of Life’, *Coleridge Bulletin: The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge* n.s. 52 (2018): 21 (17–26).

(BL I 92). As he moved away from British models of organicism, he turned to Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophies to help him solve the problems created by Cartesianism. Like the *Naturphilosophen*, he wanted to 'reunite the individual, society, and nature, and to recohere the apparently divided realms of sensual feeling and reason'.¹⁴ Coleridge's interest in *Naturphilosophie* is so well known that many critics conflate his organicism with German idealism, particularly Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's and Henrik Steffans' systems.¹⁵ Consequently, they see his ideas about organic unity as hopelessly embroiled in evasive transcendentalism that obscures social, political, and material realities, what McGann dubbed the German / Romantic ideology.¹⁶

Challenging a vast body of interpretation along these lines, Alan Richardson, Seamus Perry, and David Fairer summarize the critical commonplace. According to Richardson, scholars have long held that Coleridge's organicism exhibits a 'mentalist and transcendental bias'.¹⁷ Perry remarks that they have long privileged 'the visionary rather than the visible' in Coleridge's work, an approach that 'continues to dominate most conceptions' of him.¹⁸ Along similar lines, Fairer asserts that scholars see his organicism as a 'unified structure or metaphysical Idea' that he teleologically imposes onto objects, whether a poem or the world.¹⁹ Even though some recent critics have tried to disentangle Coleridge from transcendentalist 'system[s] of philosophy that failed to account for the experience of the facts', others continue to critique his organicism along the lines of metaphysics and ideology.²⁰ For example, Charles I. Armstrong claims that 'Coleridge's allowing for, indeed insisting upon, hierarchy is very strong' and that this 'shows the unbalanced nature of Coleridge's organic whole'.²¹ He maintains that Coleridge's struggle to reconcile the principles of unity and multitude meets the same end as Kant's model of organicism. That is, the unifying impulse ultimately prioritizes hierarchy over interdependence. Suzanne Webster asserts that despite his 'desire for an ability to view the Body/Soul [Matter/Spirit] relationship in holistic terms, Coleridge feels [this position] to be insulting' to God.²² According to these readings, despite his urge to formulate a holistic organicism, he ultimately fails when he privileges God above all else.

¹⁴ Suzanne Webster, *Body and Soul in Coleridge's Notebooks, 1827–1834: 'What Is Life?'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5.

¹⁵ Coleridge incorporated unacknowledged translations of Schelling into *Biographia* and many of his ideas in 'Theory of Life' are similar to those advanced by Steffans (see Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1969] and Levere for further discussion of the controversy surrounding Coleridge's suspected plagiarisms, and Modiano, p. 139, for a fuller list of *Naturphilosophen* whom he studied).

¹⁶ McGann, *Ideology*, 10.

¹⁷ Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism, 47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 65.

¹⁸ Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*, Oxford English Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 38.

¹⁹ Fairer, *Organising Poetry*, 10.

²⁰ Trevor H. Levere, *Poetry Realized in Nature: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Early Nineteenth-Century Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 39.

²¹ Charles I. Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 54.

²² Webster, *Body and Soul*, 85.

Where these kinds of critical assessments tend to reduce Coleridge's organicism to a static, teleological ideal, I argue that it must be understood as a process. Even though Coleridge organized living beings hierarchically because he wanted to maintain categorical distinctions 'between man and the noblest animals of the brute creation', he nonetheless emphasizes an active relationality as the governing principle, not just of life, but also the substratum that undergirds it, in a ceaseless, generative relationship with itself (*SWF* I 501). Webster argues that in his later work, Coleridge, using the logic of a 'Triune God', 'had effectively proved that no *fundamental* hierarchy existed between the . . . sources of [both] "Body" and "Soul", because they found their common being in the Divine'.²³ Despite our radically different interpretations of 'Theory of Life,' I agree with Webster's claim that Coleridge manages to account for hierarchical differences without destroying unity.²⁴ He does this by casting God as the ground of being and situating variously complex organisms within a larger framework of relationality that privileges the connections amongst the diverse parts of God's creation.

In response to claims that Coleridge advances an idealist model of organicism, I argue that in 'Theory of Life' he takes the phenomenal world into account as he attempts to reckon with his lived experience of nature. In *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (1999), Perry rightly insists that Coleridge valued 'the immediacy of sense experience' in all its glorious particularity even as he longed for 'an experience of higher oneness'.²⁵ In part, Perry's claim inspires my argument that Coleridge formulated his organicism in response to his phenomenological sense of the physical world. Coleridge was certainly interested in enduring principles but not as fixed ideals. Rather, he saw the vital and physical orders as emergent processes that are in a constant state of becoming. I maintain that he does not ignore lived experience in 'Theory of Life' but that his model of organicism reflects his innate sense that, contrary to the Cartesian model, nature is not 'the subject of merely mechanical laws' but vital and active (*LHP* II 565). In 'Theory of Life,' Coleridge tries to reconcile his sense of both 'outward appearances and [his] sympathetic sense of the inner vivacity of nature'.²⁶ Despite his need for an ordered universe, Coleridge privileges a relationality and an interdependence that do not stagnate into fixity and immobility.

²³ Webster, *Body and Soul*, 54–55.

²⁴ Examining the influence of Pauline doctrine on Coleridge's ideas about the relationship between body and soul, Webster draws heavily from the notebooks written between 1827 and 1834 and analyses them in conjunction with writings by Paul and Coleridge's comments on and about them. In her discussion of 'Theory of Life', she claims that 'although the *Theory* recognises objects of the natural world as crucial, . . . the language and tone of this work does not project any real sense of unity between Nature and God, or Nature and Man'. She further claims that Coleridge adhered to 'some degree of dualism between Nature and God' and that his 'formulation of this dualistic relationship could range from moderate to strongly radical' (Webster, *Body and Soul*, 12). Not only do I disagree with this interpretation of this text, but I also eschew her focus on ontology in favour of phenomenology, a method that yields greater insight into his organicism.

²⁵ Perry, *Uses of Division*, 64.

²⁶ Cheyne, 'Wild Activity of Thoughts', 19.

Phenomenology vs. Ontology

In the lecture that disparages Descartes, Coleridge presents 'German philosophy as a response to Locke', which provides insight into his turn to Kant and the German *Naturphilosophen*, which he looked to for solutions that he failed to find in British materialism.²⁷ Hartley's and Priestley's systems, like Spinoza's, contained the threat of pantheism that is inherent in any monist ontological system. Yet, the idealism inherent in post-Kantian philosophy is also a form of monism. According to Trevor Levere, even as he was working on *Biographia Literaria* and 'Theory of Life', Coleridge was becoming less enchanted with German idealism. He explains that while initially 'Coleridge was attracted to Schelling's ideas' because they seemed to reconcile the split between the subject and the object, he 'eventually came to recognize that Schelling's doctrines were pantheistic'.²⁸ Raimonda Modiano states that 'due to their unqualified exuberance for the notion of organic unity and polarity, the *Naturphilosophen* elevated sameness over important hierarchical differences between lower and higher forms of life and consciousness'.²⁹ Thus, they failed to take account of the phenomenological reality that differently organized organisms exhibit more or less complex physiologies and mental capacities. Even though he shared important goals with the *Naturphilosophie* project, particularly the drive to understand relationality, he neither wanted to conflate God with the material world nor to flatten the complexity of his creation. Levere and Webster note another problem with German transcendentalism that bothered Coleridge: it made nature absolute or placed too much emphasis on the self, positing 'the "I" in "I think"' as 'the source of being and knowledge'.³⁰ It is clear, however, in the 1819 lecture that neither Coleridge's interest in German philosophy nor his quarrels with it caused him to capitulate to Cartesian dualism. Still, to focus on competing materialist and idealist paradigms is to risk overlooking the value of his model of organicism, irrespective of potential ontological questions and conundrums.³¹ Furthermore, it pays little to no heed to Coleridge's careful framing of his project in 'Theory of Life'.

In 'Theory of Life', Coleridge does not treat organicism as an ontological problem but rather as a phenomenological one. Richard Sha astutely recognizes that Coleridge 'deliberately refuses to credit his claim[s] as ontological'.³² Sha notes that he frames his discussion in 'Theory of Life' as hypothesis rather than established fact. I go further, contending that Coleridge's treatise invites a phenomenological reading of organicism. He clearly indicates that he is not theorizing about life as a thing in itself but as 'the powers into which it resolves

²⁷ J. R. de J. Jackson, 'Headnote', *LHP* II 552.

²⁸ Levere, *Poetry Realized in Nature*, 68.

²⁹ Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature*, 140.

³⁰ Levere, *Poetry Realized in Nature*, 65. See also Webster, who notes that a 'point of contention with Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*' for Coleridge was 'the overall, immense privilege accorded to the human "I"' (Webster, *Body and Soul*, 8).

³¹ Focusing exclusively on onto-theological questions, Webster claims that Coleridge was a middle-of-the-road dualist, less radical than Plato but not as far gone as the *Naturphilosophen* (*Body and Soul*, 12, 65).

³² Richard C. Sha, *Imagination and Science in Romanticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 149.

itself, or rather in which it is manifested to *us*' (*SWF* I 500). The italicized 'us' emphasizes that he is thinking about physical phenomena as he perceives them. A few pages later, he reiterates that '[b]y Life I everywhere mean the . . . most general form under which Life manifests itself to us' (*SWF* I 507). Coleridge's use of the verb 'manifest' here and throughout 'Theory of Life' evokes, albeit anachronistically, the technical language of phenomenology, which is concerned not with ontology but with how the world 'discloses' itself to human consciousness. Recognizing the unavoidable subjective nature of perception, phenomenologists factor it into knowledge-making. After all, human beings can understand things only through embodied perception, even if aided by technology and scientific instruments. Evan Thompson explains that phenomenologists focus 'not on *what things are* but on the *ways in which they are given*' to the sensory apparatus.³³ In 'Theory of Life', Coleridge does not analyse life as a principle that is available for direct study. Approaching his topic with ontological modesty, he makes it clear that he is considering life as it reveals itself to human beings. Looking at Coleridge's project in phenomenological terms illuminates the deep relationality that he envisions between what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls the physical, vital, and human orders.

Coleridge's lifelong ambition (and perhaps the goal of all of Romanticism) calls forward to Merleau-Ponty's 'goal' in *The Structure of Behavior* (1942) 'to understand the relations of consciousness and nature'.³⁴ Not only does Merleau-Ponty succinctly characterize the mission of phenomenology, but also his stated aim sums up the questions that drove British and German monist theories of cognition. However, in contrast to empiricist approaches that attempt to break down the experience of reality into discrete components in order to understand the mental and physical domains, he avers that '[w]ith respect to physical nature . . . reflection reveals that physical analysis is not a decomposition into real elements and that causality in its actual meaning is not a productive operation'.³⁵ He shares this assumption with Coleridge, who expresses hostility towards British empiricism in most of his writings after the first decade of the nineteenth century. Merleau-Ponty's division of the physical world into three orders—the physical, the vital, and the human—offers a useful way to understand how Coleridge organizes and thinks about the phenomenal world in 'Theory of Life'. Even though certain laws govern the entire world system, Merleau-Ponty theorizes that each of the three orders has its own slightly different but interrelated regulating principles. The physical order comprises the inert or lifeless part of nature, and it is subject to external forces that shape and form it. The vital order, on the other hand, exhibits the power of self-initiated movement and is governed by what Coleridge would call

³³ Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Science of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 21.

³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fisher (1942; repr., Boston: Beacon, 1963), 3. According to some critics, the 'philosophical heart of romanticism' is the 'prolonged and strenuous attack on the Cartesian view' (Perry, *Uses of Division*, 122).

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behavior*, 3.

the 'Law of Life' (*SWF* I 493). The human order brings consciousness into the mix.³⁶ Merleau-Ponty defines consciousness as a uniquely human ability to be 'aware of perceiving the world'.³⁷ He also describes it as an 'internal unity of signification which distinguishes a gesture from a sum of movements'.³⁸ Not only does this definition sound remarkably similar to Coleridge's definition of the primary imagination in the *Biographia*, but it also references the human ability to both distinguish parts and recognize wholes.

As the title of his book indicates, Merleau-Ponty thinks about human behaviour as a structure of interactions between the subject and its milieu. I argue that in thinking about how the lifeforce, which Coleridge sees as a single principle, manifests as the riot of multeity that we recognize as nature, he similarly treats the tension between idea and instantiation as a structural problem. Coleridge frames divine self-consciousness as an act in which God generates himself as his own object in order to know himself. He 'abandons his original unity and views himself under separate categories' in order that he may enter into relationship with himself.³⁹ Yet, God never truly abdicates his 'incomprehensible holism'.⁴⁰ Regardless of the ontological quagmire that this engenders, and which Coleridge wrangles with in many of his writings, in 'Theory of Life' he posits a universe structured by relationality, and not just living beings whose behaviour, as I have argued elsewhere, is structurally determined, but all of the natural world, which exists first and foremost in relationship with its creator.⁴¹

Time and Space

Perhaps unexpectedly, 'Theory of Life' outlines not only Coleridge's ideas about the lifeforce but also provides an account of the inanimate world. About halfway through, before Coleridge describes animal life in terms of two striving poles that comprise a single energy—the tendency to individuate and the tendency to unify—he provides an account of how the phenomenal world comes into being. His discussion brings the fundamental relationality of his organicism into sharp relief. In *The Temple of Nature* (1803), Erasmus Darwin makes a similar move that sheds light on Coleridge's decision to account for the non-living world before he discusses living beings. For Darwin, the physical and vital orders are so intertwined that he could not account for the origin of the latter without accounting for the origin of the former.⁴² I argue that, likewise, Coleridge valued life's milieu more than he acknowledged, but more

³⁶ For a more detailed explanation of Merleau-Ponty's three orders, see Section 3, 'The Physical Order; The Vital Order; The Human Order' (*Structure of Behavior*, 129–84).

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behavior*, 126.

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behavior*, 162.

³⁹ Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature*, 193.

⁴⁰ Webster, *Body and Soul*, 55.

⁴¹ See Lisa Ann Robertson, 'Enacting the Absolute: Subject-Object Relations in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Theory of Knowledge' in *Distributed Cognition in Enlightenment and Romantic Culture*, eds. Miranda Anderson, George Rousseau, and Michael Wheeler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 118–38.

⁴² See Lisa Ann Robertson, "'Kindred forms': Erasmus Darwin's Posthuman Ethics of Relationality", *European Romantic Review* 31.5–6 (2021): 553–66.

importantly his explanation of how the inanimate world is structured demonstrates the importance of relationality to his thinking. In his discussion of time and space, Coleridge represents the structure of the phenomenal world as similar to the manifestation of the life force. As he addresses the problem of idea and instantiation, he lays the groundwork not only for his theory of life but also for his model of organicism.

Coleridge's assumptions about space and time reflect a post-Cartesian understanding that allowed him to treat them as phenomena that are implicated in and as mysterious as God himself. Under the Cartesian paradigm, space is thought to be composed of matter because it has the property of extension.⁴³ However, Newtonian physics revolutionized how thinkers understood these two phenomena. Rather than being seen as substances, they were viewed 'as real entities with their own manner of existence as necessitated by God's existence (more specifically, his omnipresence and eternity)'.⁴⁴ The affiliation of space and time with divine mysteries worked well for Coleridge, who took it for granted that God is 'the ground or cause' of everything (*SWF* I 503). Again, setting aside ontology to wander into the realm of speculation, Coleridge associates space with '*omnipresence*', which distinguishes God 'from the works, which in him move, live and have their being' (*SWF* I 520). In other words, space corresponds to and authorizes the principle of individuation. This is the mystery of 'multeity' for which Coleridge tries to account in his model of organicism (*BL* I 287). Time, on the other hand, coincides with 'his *Eternity*, or what,' according to Coleridge, 'is fully equivalent, his Unity' (*SWF* I 520). Thus, Coleridge correlates space and time with the twofold mystery that drives his organicism.

Starting with the Newtonian assumption that space and time are real entities, Coleridge describes how their interrelationships form the physical world.⁴⁵ According to Coleridge, they are the basic building blocks and, from these two 'simple ideas' emerge all the Newtonian forces that govern inanimate nature (*SWF* I 522). First, they enter into a relationship with each other, which, according to Coleridge, produces motion. Once motion has been brought into being, it enters into a relationship with time and space, which produces line. Next, line intersects with time, space, and motion to produce yet another force, and so forth, until all the Newtonian forces have been proliferated. When the 'simple ideas of time, space, and motion; of length, breadth, and depth' enter into relationships with each other they create something new, that is, Coleridge's infamous '*tertium aliud*', or the 'third other thing' (*SWF* I 522).

⁴³ In *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), Descartes 'lays out the thesis of the identity of space (extension) and matter', thus conceptualizing space as a material substance (Robert Rynasiewicz, 'Newton's Views on Space, Time, and Motion', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [2014], <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/newton-stm/>).

⁴⁴ Rynasiewicz, 'Newton, Space, Time, Motion'.

⁴⁵ In a marginal note on his copy of Kant's *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786), Coleridge notes the 'difficulties [that] are bound to arise "in a system with *begins* with Space" and defines powers "by effects and products solely relative to Space and manifestable by Space"' (Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature*, 157). Modiano points out that Coleridge's objection has to do with the ontological priority it grants to matter—space being a material phenomenon in Kant's system. My analysis points to another possible objection, that is, Kant starts with only one 'real' phenomenon, rather than the two that are necessary to form the relationships that structure the physical world.

Webster makes a similar claim, albeit in service to her argument about Coleridgean ontology. In her reading of 'Theory of Life', life processes 'adhered to the Law of Polarity by synthesising the Thesis and the Antithesis. This Synthesis displayed itself continually . . . as the phaenomenal product of the powers' strife and reconciliation was "matter"'.⁴⁶ While I do not agree with her assumption that the *tertium aliud* is necessarily matter, the process of entering into relationships that produce new phenomena does usher forth the tangible world. Coleridge states that this recursive process continues 'even till they pass into outward phenomena' (*SWF* I 522). He calls this process of structuration 'interpenetration' or 'total intussusception' (*SWF* I 525). A relatively new word in the nineteenth century, the noun intussusception hypostatizes the process by which one thing absorbs another.⁴⁷ In physiology and biology, it refers to the assimilation of new materials into a living organism that are then converted into organic tissue. Coleridge's use of the term, which he presumably cribbed from medical and scientific discourse, is similar. As a new force is produced, it assimilates its comprising forces and converts them into something with a new, but related, set of properties. Then, it disperses amongst the extant forces to repeat the process.

Coleridge supplements his explanation of intussusception with a notational system that, while partial, visually illustrates not only the proliferation of relationships of Newtonian forces from time and space, but also that relationality is a principle so fundamental that it is woven into the structure of the universe. In 'Theory of Life', Coleridge uses the language of opposition and synthesis common in German transcendentalist writings. However, Modiano notes that Coleridge later made a 'substitution of distinctness for the law of polarity', which indicates a move away from a relationship between two primary forces to an emphasis on many relationships.⁴⁸ The notations, which take the form of equations, gesture towards this way of conceiving the physical world. Furthermore, they visually depict Coleridge's structural approach. His notations are as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Time} + \text{space} &= \text{motion}; \\ Tm + \text{space} &= \text{line} + \text{breadth} = \text{depth}; \\ \text{depth} + \text{motion} &= \text{force}; \\ If + Bf &= Df; \\ LDf + BDf &= \text{attraction} + \text{repulsion} = \text{gravitation}. \end{aligned} \quad ^{49}$$

Each symbol, variable, and semantic unit in this series of equations offers insight into how the universe emerges from the fundamental phenomena of

⁴⁶ Webster, *Body and Soul*, 53.

⁴⁷ 'Intussusception, n.', in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed 14 July 2022, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/98824>.

⁴⁸ Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature*, 199.

⁴⁹ In 'Theory of Life', Coleridge incorporates the notations in his paragraph structure as a sentence rather than visually setting it off from the rest of the text. This makes it easy to overlook, particularly since he does set off other graphics elsewhere in the essay. To make them easier to read, I have put each 'equation' onto its own line (*SWF* I 522).

time and space. It also provides crucial information about how to understand Coleridge's organicism.

Examining the meanings of the mathematical symbols reveals that Coleridge's 'equations' offer an excellent demonstration of the logic of intussusception. By using different variables—L for line, f for force, D for depth, and so forth—Coleridge is able to indicate that each force is a discrete phenomenon with its own way of being and acting in the world. However, he joins them together with mathematical symbols to show how they enter into productive relationships with each other. Unsurprisingly, the plus signs indicate combinational relationships between forces. The expression 'Time + space = motion' represents a process in which time combines with space to produce line. Although, the process is not merely additive. That is, time and space are not simply increased, but the two forces join together to yield a different one, motion. The next expression, ' Tm + space = line', shows that time (T) and space have retained their original properties and continue to exist as they were prior to entering into relationship with each other. Motion (m) represents the new force composed of the assimilated and converted properties of time and space. Once it exists, motion is available to enter into relationships with the other forces, thus producing line. The individual variables continue to suggest multitey even as their conjunction produces unity. Each force is distinct from the others.

The mathematical symbols that join the variables express different kinds of relationships amongst the forces. While these relationships are impossible to trace ontologically, the combination of 'nonadditive relationships among variables, particularly exponential and multiplicative interactions' indicate a more important principle.⁵⁰ Viewed through the lens of dynamical systems theory, they reveal an attempt to represent a system that is in a perpetual state of activity. While Coleridge connects some of the variables with plus signs, several of them are adjacent to each other in groups of two or three and do not have any mathematical symbol linking them together. In these cases, the logic of algebra dictates how to understand them. '*Multiplication*' has long been 'indicate[d] by simple apposition: thus, ab signifies a multiplied by b '.⁵¹ Likewise, Tm signifies time multiplied by motion. The product of these two forces is then added to space to produce line, which is then added to breadth to produce depth. These sorts of combinations of linear and nonlinear operations are used by dynamical systems theory in the twenty-first century to represent systems that are neither static nor predictable, that is, dynamic systems. While dynamical systems theory obviously postdates Coleridge, it helps illuminate what he was trying to illustrate with his notations. When he was writing

⁵⁰ Luis H. Favela, 'Dynamical Systems Theory in Cognitive Science and Neuroscience', *Philosophy Compass* 15.8 (2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12695>.

⁵¹ Florian Cajori, *A History of Mathematical Notations* (1929; repr., New York: Dover, 1993), 224. Cajori translates the above quotation from an article by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz published in *Miscellanea Berolinensia* (1710), a journal of the Royal Prussian Society of Sciences. While mathematical notation was under contest during the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, '[m]ere juxtaposition signified multiplication' in manuscripts since the fifteenth century' (Cajori, 250).

'Theory of Life', he 'felt that the time had come to promulgate dynamism'.⁵² As their names suggest, dynamism and dynamical systems theory have similar goals—to account for systems that, contrary to those governed by mechanism, do not have easily predicted outcomes. Both Coleridge and contemporary systems theory contrast these kinds of systems with those that exhibit predictable behaviours, such as those governed by Newton's laws of motion.

Rather than dismissing Coleridge's equations as nonsense because they do not make much sense in contemporary scientific terms, I suggest that as an expression of his organicism they represent a dynamic system that is in perpetual motion and is constantly changing states. The distinction that dynamical systems theory makes between determined and dynamical systems helps elucidate Coleridge's organicism. Conceptually, determined systems are akin to 'mechanism, *ab extra*', which Coleridge explains in a note: 'whatever is organized from without, is a product of mechanism' (*SWF* I 511). Their future behaviours are predictable based on their past states and can be expressed in straightforward mathematical terms by systems theorists. For example, all the possible trajectories of a swinging pendulum can be predicted and mapped. Dynamical systems, on the other hand, can develop along so many different trajectories that to express future states requires complex mathematical calculations that capture every possible iteration as they move through time. To add another layer to this complexity, as these systems move forward in time, second-by-second, they present another set of nearly infinite possible states, making them impossible to predict. Nonetheless, even dynamical systems exist in a deterministic state space.⁵³ To apply this idea to Coleridge's account of how the phenomenal world comes into being: even though the universe is governed by certain, immutable laws—gravity, for example—it is not predetermined. The activity of forces that combine based on their various relationships leaves room for unexpected developments. His equations depict a process rather than a static ideal. Coleridge's equations also offer valuable insight into how unpredictability, what Coleridge might call acts of will, might fit into his system.⁵⁴ Thinking about his organicism in terms of dynamical systems theory helps resolve the seeming tension between materialist determinism and idealist possibility.

Read mathematically as an expression of dynamism, the addition signs and juxtaposed variables represent the idea of multitude or individuation in Coleridge's model of organicism. However, a question remains: how do his equations represent the concept of unity? This is the job of the equal signs. Equal signs, or equality signs as they are sometimes called, signify equivalencies. What appears to the left side of an equation specifies another way to express what appears to the right. In Coleridge's system of notations,

⁵² Levere, *Poetry Realized in Nature*, 81.

⁵³ Favela, 'Dynamical Systems Theory in Cognitive Science and Neuroscience', 4.

⁵⁴ The subject of freewill versus determinism is outside the scope of this article. However, in light of dynamical systems theory, it seems that there is room for what Coleridge deems acts of will. In fact, some philosophers and scientists turn to dynamical systems theory in an attempt to account the often-unpredictable outcomes of cognition. In addition to Favela, see Thompson.

the left side represents the constitutive elements that comprise the force or phenomena on the right. In the expression ‘depth + motion = force’, for example, depth and motion are the two elements that combine to produce force. What appears on the right side of the equation represents the *tertium aliud* (*SWF* I 522). Force is both the product of the variables on the left and another way to express their union.

Two of Coleridge’s five equations, however, give pause because he connects a series of operations with multiple equal signs: ‘ $Tm + \text{space} = \text{line} + \text{breadth} = \text{depth}$ ’ and ‘ $LDf + BDf = \text{attraction} + \text{repulsion} = \text{gravitation}$ ’ (*SWF* I 522). These strings of equal signs visually convey the notion that each phenomenon that appears in the series are composed of the same ‘simple ideas’, which can be traced back to Time and Space. The order of operations that dictates that multiplication must occur before any other operation clarifies how to read and understand the expression ‘ $LDf + BDf = \text{attraction} + \text{repulsion} = \text{gravitation}$ ’.⁵⁵ Both line, depth, and force (LDf) and breadth, depth, and force (BDf) must be resolved before they can combine. Apposition prescribes multiplication, so these three sets of phenomena can be understood to resolve into two forces that, when added together, create another *tertium aliud*, attraction. Attraction added to repulsion yields gravitation. Working from left to right, there are five phenomena that enter into various kinds of relationships with each other that ultimately form gravity. Read right to left, the equation reveals that Newton’s gravitational force can be traced back but not reduced to repulsion, attraction, force, depth, breadth, and length. Each of Coleridge’s phenomena is decompounded, that is, made up of compounded parts, but they cannot be decomposed into their constituent parts because of the process of intussusception. As a rhetorical strategy, the equal signs signify the underlying unity that, according to Coleridge, holds the differentiated parts of the universe together.

Scholars such as Armstrong identify this unity with the organizing life force in ‘Theory of Life’ and see it as the ruling principle to which everything else is subordinate. Yet even before he examines life in the particular, Coleridge’s discussion of the phenomenal world indicates that phenomenality is not governed by a hierarchical principle. He states that ‘we shall recognise the same forms under other names; but at each return more specific and intense; and the whole process repeated with ascending gradations of reality’ (*SWF* I 522). These returns suggest that phenomenality is ruled by the principle of relationality in which simple forces enter into relationships and modify each

⁵⁵ It is not anachronistic to impose the order of operations onto Coleridge’s formulas. As late as 1920, there was some confusion about the order of operations. Cajori, writing in 1928–29, states that ‘there is at present no agreement as to which sign shall be used first’ (Cajori, *History of Mathematical Notations*, 274). However, there seems to be widespread agreement amongst mathematicians today that sometime in the seventeenth century ‘the rule that multiplication has precedence over addition appeared to have arisen naturally’ in response to the need for a standardized convention (‘What Is Pemdass Rule and How Did It Originate?’, 7 December 2021, <https://www.makeitmissoula.com/2021/12/what-is-pemdass-rule-and-how-did-it-originate/>). Even though the debate about order of operations, for whatever reason, resurfaced in the 1920s, in the nineteenth century, ‘textbook authors [tacitly] formalized the “rules”’ (Dave Peterson, ‘Order of Operations: Historical Caveats – The Math Doctors’, 17 October 2019, <https://www.themathdoctors.org/order-of-operations-historical-caveats/>).

other to create a potentially infinite number of combinations. It is this process, intussusception, I argue that underwrites Coleridge's model of organicism, and his discussion of time and space, along with his notational equations, explain how the physical world comes into being reveal that he sees the universe as structured by relationships.

Even as Coleridge began to think in more explicitly religious, rather than philosophical, terms, the way he conceived of the relationships between each part or 'person' comprising the triune God continues to reflect his relational concept of organicism. The hallowed mystery of the holy Trinity resembles the relationship between God as the ground of being, time, and space. According to Modiano, the 'separation between God the Father and Son generates interaction and, as it were, a flow of energy'.⁵⁶ Whether Coleridge conflated this 'energy' with the holy spirit, it certainly recalls the energetic Newtonian forces that emerged from the relationships formed by time, space, and the phenomena they produced. Furthermore, he 'presents the interaction between the Father and the Son as an exchange of camaraderie and affection made possible by the Holy Ghost', which gives some insight into how he saw properly functioning relationships amongst the parts of his organic whole.⁵⁷ While not every part of Coleridge's system has the capacity to engage in compassionate, loving relationships to the same degree or, perhaps, at all, nonetheless his trinitarian model suggests that people, at least, should realize the importance of both the organic whole and the individual parts that comprise it. This ethical capacity calls humankind to revalue its relationship with the people and the world around it, to recognize the interconnectedness of all things, and to act with concern towards the parts in order to preserve the integrity of the whole.

Conclusion

Coleridge's organicism reflects his desire to reunite that which Cartesian dualism had ontologically and epistemologically dismantled and disconnected—nature, humankind, and God. By bracketing the question of how Coleridge's system functions ontologically, a significant tenet of his thinking appears: his deep commitment to relationality. The benefits of attending to relationality in Coleridge's work are, at least, two-fold. First, it provides a fresh lens with which to approach the rest of his writings. Often, Coleridge's work is viewed as conflicted, rife with internal division, and radically shifting from one position to another over the course of his career. The principle of relationality provides a thread of continuity that helps weave his disjointedness into coherence by revealing the basic precept that undergirds his lifelong struggle to overcome Cartesian dualism. Rereading the *Biographia*, for example, with an eye for relationality rather than division makes sense of his model of emergent knowledge. Setting aside obsessions with ontology enables readers to acknowledge then move past the paradoxical conundrums

⁵⁶ Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature*, 194.

⁵⁷ Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature*, 77.

entailed by his discussion of how the subject and object relate to the absolute. For instance, applying this lens to Coleridge's 'Essays on the Principles of Method', published in *The Friend* (1818), calls attention to the importance of relationships amongst physical phenomena in cultivating methodical thinking and moving towards realization of inner truths.

This revaluation of phenomenality in Coleridge's work also invites scholars to revisit his poetry. For example, 'The Eolian Harp' has long been interpreted as a mass of contradictory philosophical ideals that Coleridge ultimately rejects for the safety of religion. However, if Coleridge considered neither the body nor the physical world as a threat to freewill and creativity, the poem demands more complex interpretations. Elsewhere, I suggest that 'The Eolian Harp' offers readers an opportunity to actively engage with a physical phenomenon (the poem itself) and to use it to cultivate methodical thinking.⁵⁸ Disconnecting aesthetic organicism from transcendentalism creates space for new formalist explorations of poetry without the idealist or dualist trappings often associated with ideological obfuscation. The patterns of relationality in 'Theory of Life' are also present in the rest of Coleridge's vast corpus and can provide fresh insight into his work that can also help revitalize the study of poetry.

Additionally, understanding Coleridge's resistance to Cartesianism as phenomenologically motivated and viewing his organicism as a dynamic system structured by relationality is a step towards recuperating Romantic organicism. In contrast to Armstrong, who sees 'the organicist approach [as] beset with contradiction and insuperable aporias' and organicism as an 'embattled site suspect to radical revisions and denunciations', I see organicism as having enough internal consistency to serve as a metaphor, especially when examined in conjunction with certain contemporary cutting edge scientific theories.⁵⁹ It offers an important model that reminds us that human beings exist within a vibrant, yet inescapable, web of relations made up of living and non-living parts. Hence, Coleridge's organicism offers attentive readers and scholars important, though perhaps not new, ways to approach the conditions of modernity. The web of relationality, signified in contemporary terms by the world wide web, the environment, and globalism, has become visible in new ways in the twenty-first century. The Internet has expanded the bounds of Benedict Anderson's imagined communities, which has acquired new contours as users interact with content and people from across the globe that allow them to think and connect across national boundaries, forming groups based on politics, sexuality, gender identity, or any other real or fancied paradigm of connection.⁶⁰ Likewise, for many, the cumulative effects of industrialization, consumerism, and the conveniences of contemporary technology on the

⁵⁸ This argument appears in my forthcoming monograph, *Embodied Organicism: Cognition, Aesthetics, and Ethics in British Romantic Literature and Science*, with Liverpool University Press.

⁵⁹ Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism*, 186.

⁶⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

environment are becoming increasingly and devastatingly real, as are the inequitable effects of global capitalism.

I am convinced that many of the effects of modernity, from social isolation to the abuse of nature, stem from the Cartesian separation of the human *cogito* from its natural home—the body and the environment in which it is situated. Rather than rejecting it, I want, with Fairer, to shake loose ‘the concept of organic unity’ from its identification with the ‘formalist values’ of the ‘New Critics’ so that it can become a practical ideal.⁶¹ I do not suggest that organicism offers a panacea that can solve or reverse the social and physical effects of centuries of damage. However, Coleridge’s phenomenological organicism can help us remember that how we interact with our environment, structure our societies, and behave towards other people have consequences, some of which have become increasingly clear the further we move away from the Romantic period. I propose that we use the relationality that structures Coleridge’s organicism as a model for our own lives, behaviours, actions, and ways of relating. Focusing on community may help us act more justly and kindly towards others—both living and non-living, global and local. Despite our multiplicity—or diversity, as we might call it today—we do, indeed, live with a form of unity that connects us all not just through relationships, but also through the effects of our attitudes and actions. We need to be reminded that we are interdependent parts of a system on which we depend just as much as those parts depend on us. For these reasons, I call our attention to a new understanding of Coleridgean organicism.

⁶¹ Fairer, *Organising Poetry*, 25.