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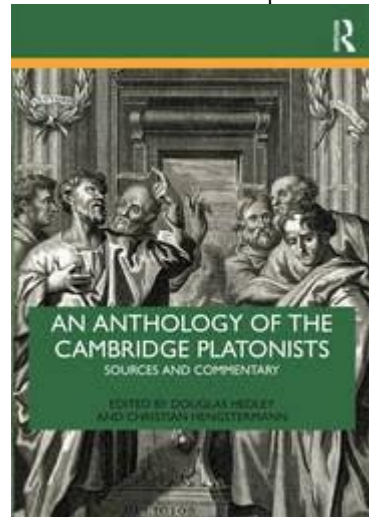
*An Anthology of the Cambridge Platonists:
Sources and Commentary*

Edited by Douglas Hedley and Christian Hengstermann¹

IN THEIR NEW ROUTLEDGE *ANTHOLOGY*, Douglas Hedley and Christian Hengstermann have assembled a most useful resource for readers who want to deepen their understanding of the Cambridge Platonists—who of course had a major influence on Coleridge’s early philosophical development. Hedley is well known to Coleridgeans for his erudite *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion* (2000), a work which built on earlier studies of the role of Platonism by Muirhead, Orsini, Engell, Perkins, and others.² In more recent years, Hedley has been the director of the Cambridge Centre for the Study of Platonism; and in the *Anthology*, he and his co-editor have brought together a selection of excerpts from eight of these writers, arranged thematically and accompanied by excellent introductions written by a number of specialists. As befits a product of the Cambridge School of Divinity, the anthology has a strong theological focus, in addition to its coverage of more narrowly defined metaphysical issues.

Indeed, there is much in the *Anthology* for those who want to understand the Church politics of the seventeenth century. Marilyn Lewis usefully places the Cambridge Platonists within ‘a time of political, social and theological conflict’ (21), when the Church was riven between Calvinist Puritans and Archbishop Laud’s emphasis on high church liturgy. Hovering always in the background was the fear of a return to Roman Catholicism—a fear almost realised with the accession of James II in 1685.

Most of the Cambridge Platonists were ordained members of the Anglican Church and needed to negotiate their ways through the upheavals of the Commonwealth period. Parliament executed Archbishop Laud in 1645, and the Calvinist Earl of Manchester instituted a purge of Cambridge fellows. He targeted in particular those who refused to sign the Solemn League and Covenant, which the Scottish Presbyterians were attempting to force upon the Church of England, along with a Presbyterian structure (22). Several of the



¹ Douglas Hedley and Christian Hengstermann, eds., *An Anthology of the Cambridge Platonists: Sources and Commentary* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

² J. H. Muirhead, ‘The Cambridge Platonists (I)’, *Mind*, n.s. 36.142 (1927), 158–78; G. N. G. Orsini, *Coleridge and German Idealism* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969); James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Mary Anne Perkins, *Coleridge’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Cambridge Platonists were ejected from Cambridge, and others were ejected at the Restoration, when their earlier cooperation with the Commonwealth was held against them. It was during this period that they acquired the epithet, 'latitudinarians', originally a term of abuse but later adopted by some of their disciples (25). As George Rust put it in 1663, 'in matters of opinion, . . . the Church of *England* does here allow so fair a latitude, that a sober . . . spirit can hardly desire a greater' (61). If an agnostic may venture an opinion, latitudinarianism is something the church could do with more of both then and now.

Coleridge's interest in the Cambridge Platonists was formative. As George Whalley revealed seventy-five years ago, Coleridge borrowed the group's most substantial work, *True Intellectual System of the Universe* by Ralph Cudworth, from the Bristol Library in May 1795 and again in November of 1796.³ It is a massive tome and was often used as a 'handbook of historical philosophy' in the eighteenth century, as Marilyn Lewis remarks (340). Coleridge drew on it heavily in his *Lectures 1795*, and it is reasonable to assume that it shaped much of his understanding of ancient philosophy.

As Hedley points out, one early sign of influence lies in 'The Eolian Harp', where we find the famous lines (331):

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

While Spinoza's pantheism is an obvious source here, the idea of a 'plastic' or formative force comes from Cudworth who was, in some senses, a monist like Spinoza, at least within the realm of the creation—though the similarities end there. Cudworth draws on Plato's *Timaeus*, with its notion of an *anima mundi* (323) or demiurge who organises nature so that God is freed from the bother. In Cudworth's case, this is an 'intermediate . . . spirit of nature', a non-intellectual life or vital motion that moves the otherwise inert corpuscles of matter (221). For Henry More, this plastic power is a '*subtile Matter*, which answers to our *Animal Spirits*', a more refined form of matter capable of moving inert matter (11).⁴ The later Coleridge was, of course, an idealist who saw no role for matter and who would have regarded the Cambridge view as a defective model for the immanence of God. Hedley rightly concludes that the 'Cudworthian language

³ George Whalley, 'The Bristol Library Borrowings of Southey and Coleridge, 1793–8', *Library* 4 (1949): 120, 124.

⁴ The need for 'subtile Matter' arises for the Cambridge Platonists because they broadly accept Descartes's view that matter is essentially spatial. Descartes viewed it as utterly different in kind from mind or spirit, which leads (as his critics pointed out) to the mind-body problem: if mind is quite different from matter, how does mind affect body? The Cambridge Platonists solved this problem by rejecting Descartes' dualism, and instead viewed the human mind as a more refined form of matter, which is thus capable of influencing body. However, while subtile matter solves the problem of dualism, it leaves unsolved the problem of how such matter can think, if matter is defined primarily by spatial extension.

does not necessarily imply pantheism; the Platonism, however, is undeniable' (331).

There is further evidence of a Cambridge influence on Coleridge in the idea of the pre-existence of the soul—a view, incidentally, that Cudworth rejects.⁵ This is an idea that finds its ultimate source in the heterodox Alexandrian theologian, Origen (*c.* 185–*c.* 253), but also comes to the fore in writings of Cudworth's contemporaries, Henry More and George Rust (27). Indeed, the Cambridge Platonists have sometimes been called 'Origenian Platonists' (29). The idea of the pre-existence of the soul was developed and critically modified by Coleridge in the section of the *Opus Maximum* entitled 'On the Divine Ideas', where the human soul finds its eternal archetype in the divine distinctities, ideas within the pleroma. For while these distinctities are not 'persons' or souls (these arise for Coleridge only within the finite realm, as products of Schelling's dialectic), they are their prototypes.⁶ In a notebook entry from July 1822, Coleridge praises Wordsworth's 'incomparable' 'Intimations Ode', referring to the famous line 'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting', but also quotes with approval the Cambridge Platonist, Henry More's 'Poem on The Pre-existancy of the Soul' (CN IV 4910, f.71v).

The same notebook entry, however, sets out the limits of the later Coleridge's interest in Cambridge Platonism. He traces the 'sudden decay of Platonism in the 16th and 17th Centuries' to their 'obscure and . . . erroneous exploration of *Matter*' (CN IV 4910, f.73). He says:

Henry More [illicitly] blended the Doctrine of Des Cartes (*viz.* that Matter is mere extension, and that Body and Soul or Spirit are essentially heterogenous[]), with the Notions of Plotinus, which are built on the assumption of their being differences in degree, Body being the dying-away of Spirit into its last vibrations.

Coleridge goes on to say that 'This [blend of Cartesian dualism and Plotinian monism] . . . is an evil common to the Pseudo-platonists'—and on those grounds he accords them less of his time and attention in later years. This may not, of course, be a fair reading of More, who argued that the soul was extended and always in need of a body—a view in part taken up by Coleridge in the late notebooks, where he argues like More for the dependence of the post-mortem soul on a celestial body (230).⁷ But Coleridge had no use for the Cambridge view that soul consisted of a subtle ether, pervading more ordinary matter; and in the later notebooks, for instance, there are no direct references to Cudworth.

Coleridge's focus shifted in his later years from the naïve corpuscularian materialism of his younger days to a post-Kantian idealism with a quite different ontology. Coleridge nonetheless continued to view the Cambridge Platonists as

⁵ Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, Book 1, section xxxiv, <https://www.cambridge-platonism.divinity.cam.ac.uk/view/texts/diplomatic/Cudworth1678-excerpt003>

⁶ On Schelling, see my *Coleridge, Form and Symbol* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), ch. 6. On the distinctities, see pp. 142–43.

⁷ See Suzanne Webster, *Body and Soul in Coleridge's Notebooks 1827–1834* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

embodying 'the spiritual Platonic old England' (4; *CN* II 2598) and admits that they 'have a charm for Minds, that feel and struggle up against the weight and witchery of Custom and yearn for . . . a reality beyond what the flux of the Senses can afford' (*CN* IV 4910, f.73v). For the later Coleridge, then, the Cambridge Platonists had been formative but had also been outgrown. Where they were accused of a backwards-looking antiquarianism by Cassirer in 1932, for Coleridge their mistake lay precisely in their attempt to reconcile Platonism and the then new materialism of Descartes, Hobbes, and seventeenth-century physics more generally (4).

Despite his later criticisms of the Cambridge Platonists, there was much in their doctrines that Coleridge continued to agree with. Hedley sums up the key aspects of their version of Platonism as:

- 1) the identification of the Good in Plato's *Republic* with God; 2) the location of the Platonic ideas within the mind of God; and 3) the contrast between the temporal world of flux and the unchanging world of the divine mind, [with] the visible transient world . . . a reflection of the invisible. (5)

All three aspects are to be found in the late Coleridge's system, though his view of nature had darkened considerably since his early reading of Cudworth.

Similarly, Coleridge continued to engage with a number of the issues discussed by the Cambridge Platonists and responded in his later years with more nuance than I have space to outline here. Hedley's introduction discusses issues ranging from Plotinus (8), the divine ideas (10), materialism (10), the theological voluntarism of Descartes (13),⁸ fear of God and Calvinism (13), enthusiasm (14), and the Trinity (15). Later chapters cover conversion and faith, rational theology, Calvinism, Hobbesian materialism, Descartes, Böhme and Spinoza, to mention but a few. Hedley additionally supplies an epilogue tracing the afterlife of the Cambridge Platonists, covering topics ranging from ethics, nature, the British empiricists and continental thinkers; and also (most importantly from our point of view) the Romantics. Coleridge's responses to the Cambridge circle's views on many of these topics would make for interesting MA and PhD theses.

Hedley's introduction ends with a polemical, if brief, defence of the continuing relevance of the Cambridge Platonists. Platonism is, of course, susceptible to the objections against arm-chair philosophy, and mostly rejected by contemporary philosophers. The objections are largely epistemological: if there were to be ideas existing as forms outside of time and space, or within the mind of God, it is not clear how we could have access to them. Locke, for instance, rejected innate ideas (ideas perhaps implanted in our minds before birth) and restricted intuition to empirical matters. And Kant showed that pure reason is riven by contradiction, thus undermining claims to intuition. Nonetheless, Platonism remains alive and well in some quarters, particularly amongst mathematicians and logicians from Frege and Gödel to recent Nobel

⁸ Theological voluntarism describes a God who could choose to change eternal truths if he willed it.

Prize winner Roger Penrose. It would be interesting to see a longer defence of Platonism from Hedley, who restricts himself in the book's epilogue to the suggestion that the Cambridge Platonists addressed a number of questions that remain pressing in the twenty-first century, including 'the relationship between consciousness and matter; . . . fact and value; [and] theism, pantheism and atheism' (333).

It's been many years since I sat down as a graduate student to read Cudworth, from whom I learnt much of what I claim to know of ancient philosophy. Were I advising a student today, I would happily suggest the student begin with the *Anthology*, which nicely sets out the issues and provides the evidence. For the most part, the writing is succinct and commendably clear, though it would have been helpful to insert translations of the Greek and Latin into the texts themselves. There are occasional lapses into highly nominalised prose (where the verbs have morphed into abstract nouns), and I did note one paragraph that lasted for three pages. But these are minor cavils in a work that fulfils its purpose admirably, bringing these fascinating works into a single, accessible collection.