AN EXISTENTIALIST INTERPRETATION OF COLERIDGE'S THEORY OF BEING

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Along with the religious interpretation of life and the principle of imagination, one of the striking features of Coleridge's theory of being is its close parallelism with the modern version of existentialism. When he placed the "ground and genesis" of his metaphysical system neither in a fact impressed, nor in a generalization from facts collectively, nor in an abstraction embodied in a hypothesis but in an "act," in the "verb" in the language of grammarians, he simply professed himself a legitimate existentialist in its modern sense, no matter whether he was aware of this fact or not.

Existentialism as a principle of philosophy is not necessarily a new idea. It dates back to the pre-Socratic ages when they proclaimed the absolute domination of the will to power in the name of primacy of sensation against abstract ideas in general. Their proclamation appeared in the form of life vs ideas. For the basic principle of existentialism is the will to exalt the fact of life and existence in opposition to the idealized concepts of reality, the will to revolt of life itself against the ideas of life, that is, essentialism in particular.

Of these two modes in conflict of metaphysical interpretation of human reality, essentialism represents the concept of essence in terms of predicate, whereas existentialism intuits the fact of existence in the form

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of copula. Their objective correlatives are what and how of human reality, and their literary expressions, classic and romantic representations of life. In other words, while essentialism constitutes a science of being, existentialism is exclusively a philosophy of life, theosophy representing the transcendental cognition of the absolute as an ultimate unity of these two conflicting aspects of human reality.

One of the essential features of existentialism interpreted in terms of copula, accordingly, consists in an act, not static but kinetic, in the fact of existence as a "mere act of existing." Its subject is not "existence" but the "existent (l'existant)"; not "death" but "I die," not "love" as an idea but "I love" as an act "in conflict," neither "existential" nor "ontological" but "existential" and "ontic," in a word, pre- or non-categorical, because human reality does not exist except in an act.

The interpretation of existence as the "internal copula of bodies," however, presupposes complicated problems, of which self-development and self-negation constitute two major aspects of existentialism in its modern phase, the former being the absolute affirmation of the fact of life as it really manifests itself, and the latter, the negation of reality per se. "We've got to live," writes D. H. Lawrence, "no matter how many skies have fallen." "Nous n'avons que cette vie à vivre,"

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4 Coleridge, Selected Poetry & Prose, ed. Donald A. Stauffer (Mod. Lib.), p. 519. For convenience, this edition will be used hereafter, besides the 7-volume Shedd edition (New York, 1884).

5 Benda, op. cit., p. 12.

6 Foulquié, op. cit., p. 74.

7 For these technical terms, see Martin Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, &c.


9 Coleridge, op. cit., p. 573.

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declares J.-P. Sartre, “au milieu de cette guerre, de cette révolution peut-être.”11 In quest of the ultimate beyond reality, on the contrary, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry flatly deny the existence of the real, because it is “vil” and “nul.”12

Existence per se as a mere act of existing is, “in the order of Nature,” if not in time,13 prior to essence,14 the former belonging to the world of reason, and the latter to that of understanding. It is absolutely formless and obscure, indefinable and opaque beyond our “explications et raisons”;15 in a word, “none” in terms of Coleridge.16 For, as an internal copula of reality, it cannot be either predicated or explicated in terms of logic. It simply “is,” the absolute,17 in that it is purely existential. “Exister, c’est être là (Da-sein), simplement,”18

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14 This is one of the basic concepts underlying the major works of Sartre. He firmly asserts: “chez l’homme—et chez l’homme seul—l’existence précède l’essence” (Action, 29 déc. 1944), although in the world of manufacture, essence precedes existence, because production follows the idea (form) inherent in the mind of producer. (Cf. L’Existentialisme, Eng. tr., pp. 15-6.) For a similar concept particularly expressed in the latter part of the sentence, see Coleridge, Hints towards the Formation of a more Comprehensive Theory of Life: “As the second instance, I will take the inventor and maker of the machine himself, who knows its moving power, or perhaps himself constitutes it, who is, as it were, the soul of the work, and in whose mind all its parts, with all their bearings and relations, had pre-existed long before the machine itself had been put together (italics mine).” (Op. cit., p. 570 n.)
17 Ibid., pp. 520, &c.
18 La Nausée, p. 166.
and its only possible predicate is, if it has any, "it is," acknowledging itself in terms of "I am in that I am."\(^{19}\)

In face of this absolute sense of existence, even time and space as \textit{a priori} forms of sense fade away into the form of copula as a mere act of existing, constituting a spacio-temporo awareness of absolute dimension, the absolute entity of "active negation" (nowhere) and "infinite capacity" (now).\(^{21}\) This awareness of absolute reality, that is, of life itself as an absolute entity of "polarity" towards "individuation,"\(^{22}\) is called by Coleridge the "internal copula of bodies," the "power which discloses itself from within as a principle of unity in the many."\(^{23}\)

These two aspects of existence, namely, existence as the principle of self-developing, internal copula of human reality, that is, as an entity of absolute dimension, at once spaceless and timeless in terms of "absolute 0,"\(^{24}\) and existence as the principle of synthetic unity in the many based on a metaphysical interpretation of the Heraclitean perception of similitude in dissimilitude, constitute a crucial concept of existence as "none," the problem of \textit{Nothing} in terms of modern existentialism.

According to the modern existentialist thinkers, Jaspers, Heidegger

\(^{19}\) Coleridge, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 519.


\(^{21}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 581.  For the literary interpretation of this concept of absolute dimension, see T. S. Eliot’s "still point" in \textit{Burnt Norton}, Ernest Hemingway’s architectonic world of temporal beauty described in terms of "nowhere" and "now" in \textit{For Whom the Bell Tolls} (Bantam, pp. 171, 403), together with Marcel Proust’s and Thomas Mann’s time-awareness as an absolute entity.

\(^{22}\) According to Coleridge, life is defined (1) \textit{absolutely}, as the "principle of unity in multitude," and (2) \textit{eminently} (i.e., phenomenologically), as the "principle of individuation, or the power which unites a given \textit{all into a whole} that is presupposed by all its parts." (\textit{Op. cit.}, p. 573.)

By \textit{polarity} is meant the "essential dualism of Nature, arising out of its productive unity, and still tending to reaffirm it, either as equilibrium, indifference, or identity," that is, the "Universal Law of Life." (\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 578, 580.)


\(^{24}\) Cf. Muirhead, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 77.
and Sartre alike, by Nothing (Nichts, néant) is meant an essential feature of human reality. For our reality interpreted as a mere self-asserting entity has no more self-conscious awareness of itself than a non-conscious assertion of itself as a mere existing entity which is "de trop." Existence in this sense is no more than a brute state of reality, having no substantial difference from a state of "somnambulism," a non-conscious assertion of the fact of living as a mere act of existing, that is, unconscious productivity, "l'opacité," "l'existence nue," "l'absurdité fondamentale."

In the field of consciousness, however, existence as Nothing takes the form of self-negation, and it is in this metaphysical sense that existence becomes a transcendental entity, that is, conscience, constituting the inner core of human reality. In other words, while Nothing is an immanent reality incorporated in the fact of existence, self-negation constitutes a transcendental realization of the reason of existence as nonentity.

In terms of Heidegger, Nothing constitutes the inner core of human reality which exists as a "unity in the many (in der Einheit des

25 _La Nausée_, p. 163.
26 Coleridge, _op. cit._, p. 527.
Reality itself is no more than a "larve coulante." "Il n'y avait rien eu avant lui (le monde). Rien. Il n'y avait pas eu de moment où il aurait pu ne pas exister. C'est bien ça qui m'irritait: bien sûr il n'y avait aucune raison pour qu'elle existât, cette larve coulante. Mais il n'était pas possible qu'elle n'existât pas." (_Ibid._, p. 170.)
Life is "de trop." Death is also "de trop" in the same sense. "Je rêvais vaguement de me supprimer, pour anéantir au moins une de ces existences superfliues. Mais ma mort même eût été de trop. De trop, mon cadavre, mon sang sur ces cailloux, entre ces plantes, au fond de ce jardin souriant. Et la chair rongée eût été de trop dans la terre qui l'eût reçue et mes os, enfin, nettoyés, écorcés, propres et nets comme des dents eussent encore été de trop: j'étais de trop pour l'éternité (italics mine)." (_Ibid._, p. 163.)
Ganzen)."\textsuperscript{28} For the essential postulate for human reality is to "exist in the many (das Seiende im Ganzen),"\textsuperscript{29} which implies at once the cosmic and ethical awareness of human reality as Nothing. Cosmic in terms of frustration complex in face of the infinite. The fact that even the Universe is finite makes the awareness of human reality more and more untenable.

Another aspect of Nothing is ethical. By ethical is meant that the essential condition of human reality is to exist in the many against one's will to assert one's own existence, which implies self-negation, the core of Angst or Sorge. For human reality is impossible to exist outside of the many, because existence means "in-der-Welt-sein," and self-development \textit{per se} involves self-negation as its essential postulate. "Dasein heisst," declares Heidegger, "Hineingehaltenheit in das Nichts." For "das Nichts ist die Ermöglichung der Offenbarkeit des Seienden als solchen für das menschlichen Dasein."\textsuperscript{30} In other words, Nothing is a potential entity identical with the "life-ebullient stream," which "breaks through every momentary embankment, again, indeed, and evermore to embank itself, but within no banks to stagnate or be imprisoned,"\textsuperscript{31} that is, "l'étan vital," the \textit{potential nonentity}, which is transcendental in that "to be held in Nothing is to overcome oneself in the many (die Hineingehaltenheit des Dasein in das Nichts ... ist das Uebersteigen des Seienden im Ganzen: die Transzen-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} \textit{Was ist Metaphysik?} (F. a. M., 1922, 1951), p. 28. His parallelism with Coleridge not merely in terminology but in metaphysical structure is conspicuous throughout his works.
\item \textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 27-8, &c. Almost the same idea has been employed by Sartre in \textit{L'Existentialisme}. According to his interpretation, human reality is understood as a projection freely involved in the configuration of \textit{a priori} limits and historical situation, that is, "in-der-Welt-geworfen-sein," in order to establish a human realm as an ensemble of values quite distinct from that of the material world. (Cf. \textit{Loc. cit.}, Eng. tr., pp. 44-7.) Here again is a close affinity between Sartre and Coleridge via Heidegger.
\item \textsuperscript{30} \textit{Was ist Metaphysik?} p. 32.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Coleridge, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 524.
\end{itemize}
According to Coleridge, furthermore, the predicate of all real being is the "oneness of space and time," in other words, a potential nonentity, the pure duration of absolute dimension, at once spaceless and timeless, consisting of the self-developing polarity and synthesizing faculty of the existent. In terms of mathematics, it is a "null-point" or "zero," devoid of any self-developing potentiality, simply the "absolute 0" as a natura naturata. In its eminence, however, it is a punctum saliens as a natura naturans, an entity of infinite possibility and formability constituting the inner core of the finite. At this point of silence as an internal fulcrum of the transcendental awareness of human reality as an absolute nonentity, the sense of time turns into a spaceless point (nowhere) and that of space vanishes into a mere awareness of timeless "All" (now), comprising a still point of "absolute weakness and formlessness," of "infinite capacity and formability."

The concept of Nothing as an internal copula of existence gave Coleridge's theory of being a specific aspect. Also transcendental in the proper sense of the word, he himself aimed at "beginning where Kant had ended and completing what he had begun," that is, the recon-
struction of the world of reality as it really manifests itself in its im-
manent aspects on the basis of transcendental intuition, overcoming
the contradictory traditional notion of subject and object in terms of
nonentity.

"The full applicability of an abstract science ceases," says Coleridge,
"the moment reality begins,"38 the moment philosophy of life begins.
By an abstract science is meant, needless to say, the world of analytical,
critical understanding, whereas reality belongs in the form of nonentity
to the realm of reason. Paradoxically, reason itself constitutes the
inner core of nonentity, the major function of which is prosthetic,
rather than synthetic. The transition of Being—Not-being—Becoming
is "not dialectic but sophistry,"39 because reality per se is a prosthetic
entity, not quantitative but qualitative. The true opposite of "To be"
is not "Nothing"; it is "Not to be." "Nothing" itself is involved in
"To be" in the form of copula as a creative nonentity. Its inner
development, that is, life per se, accordingly, cannot be grasped by a
mere external synthetic process based on analytical science. "L'univers
de la science est quantitatif," declares Sartre, "et la quantité est tout
juste le contraire de l'unité dialectique."40 It is transcendental in
that it cannot be realized except in terms of the mind as a prosthetic
entity.

"There are many kinds of subject," writes Coleridge, "mind is that
kind which is its own object."41 This interpretation of mind is at
once traditional and authentic. The innermost core of the mind as an
object, however, is formless and opaque, indefinable and obscure. It is
an entity purely qualitative, which cannot be comprehended except "in

40 "Matérialisme et révolution," Situations, III (Paris, 1947), p. 146. Here is
again a close parallelism between Sartre and Coleridge. Compare Sartre's concept
of "quality" with that of Coleridge, op. cit., p. 579 n.
41 Quoted in Muirhead, op. cit., p. 94.
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relation with (in eins mit)"42 the outward world. It is, in terms of Sartre, "non-positionnel," "l'être en-soi," "l'opacité,"43 in other words, a "larve coulante,"44 a brute state of existence which is impossible not to exist. It is an "ontic" reality that is inherent in the copula of an existing entity in the form of pre-predicative potentiality ("in der vorprädikativen Offenbarkeit von Seiendem gewulzelt").45 In other words, it is conscience itself, and when transcendentally detected, it becomes an "inner concept of the existent (Imbegriff des Dingens)," "l'existence nue."

On the other hand, the mind as subject is identical with reason, and at times, with imagination. It is a natura naturans in that it is "positionnel," "l'être pour-soi," a creative entity of intuitive, prosthetic reasoning. It is an ontological, therefore transcendental, entity which alone makes it possible for the mind to detect the inner concept of existence including the mind itself.

The function of mind as an internal entity of unifying faculty is, therefore, (1) to affirm its own reality (i.e., the punctum saliens, l'opacité, das Unbedingte), (2) to realise this reality (sich befinden) as a unity (unity in the many, die Einheit im Ganzen), (3) to communicate this unity (ontological entity, das Seiende im Ganzen) to others, and lastly to derive its own reality from its own reality (transcendence).46 In other words, the mind itself is interpreted as constituting the still point of absolute weakness and formlessness, of infinite capacity and formability.

"Nothing" in this sense is absolute, subjective. It is an entity exclusively based on the absolute subjectivity of the subject as an ontological nonentity. There is no reality except ab intra, from within.

42 Was ist Metaphysik? pp. 30-1.
43 L'Être et le néant, pp. 18, 20, 33, &c.
44 La Nausée, p. 170.
46 Cf. Muirhead, op. cit., p. 75.
The essential function of the mind as subject is therefore self-negation and transcendence.

It is also in line with the modern principle of existentialism. For "subjectivity," declares Sartre, "must be the starting point." There is not such an entity like "objective reality" which is absolute. Even the idea of absolute reality is itself an imaginary projection of the mind. What is absolute is not the object but the mind as subject, and what makes it objective is its capacity of negation and transcendence. For not "presence" but "absence," not "plenitude" but "negation" makes it an objective entity constituting the world of reality. "Il faut que l'objet se distingue de la conscience," writes Sartre, "non par sa présence, mais par son absence, non par sa plénitude, mais par son néant." Declaring absolute subjectivity long before Dostoievsky, Thoreau the transcendentalist proclaimed: "Of what consequence, though our planet explode, if there is no character involved in the explosion."

The reality thus interpreted is no more than a projection of our conscience, a projection identical with consciousness itself serving as an inner check to our, so to speak, reckless subjectivity. For our conscience presupposes the existence of not merely one's own self but other selves, because human reality is an entity projected in the many. Consciousness in the proper sense of the word involves, according to Coleridge, "self-consciousness," a subjective entity, existential and ontic in its primary structure, which in turn presupposes the existence of the "consciousness of an other than self—a thou, a he, or an it," an

47 L'Existentialisme, Eng. tr., p. 15.
48 L'Être et le néant, p. 27.
49 "Life Without Principle," Walden & Other Writings (Mod. Lib.), p. 724. "Involvement" in this sense constitutes the inner core of modern existentialism. For its implications, see Heidegger's "Entwurf" and "Geworfheit" together with Sartre's "engagement" in connection with the existentialist concept of "in-der-Welt-sein," where one's existence is expounded in terms with "sich-in-der-Welt-geworfene, le-moi-jeté-dans-le-monde."
entity, existential and ontological, constituting one of the unique ethical principles of our existence.\textsuperscript{50} In other words, ascribing to the mind these twofold essential features, that is, self-consciousness as the principle of existential entity, and the consciousness of other selves than one’s own as the principle of existential reality, he carefully avoided a critical moment in the theory of absolute subjectivity.

The dialectic intellect, however, being finite in itself, has now reached a critical point: whether to admit the absolute as a supreme being and the finite as “nothings,” denying altogether the reality of all finite existence, or \textit{vice versa}. In either case, we ask ourselves: “Are we then indeed nothings? How and whence did this sterile and pertinacious nothing acquire its plural number?” The concept of \textit{Angst} in its modern phase appears in its original form: “Unde quaesoo, haec nihilin in nihilatam portentosa transnihilatio (italics mine)\textsuperscript{51}”

The portentous transnihilation of nothings into nothings—here seems to lie a deep insight of Coleridge into the inner structure of being, an intuition identical with the modern sense of \textit{Angst}, because the essential feature of Nothing is to “nihilate of itself (das Nichts selbst nichtet).”\textsuperscript{52} It is \textit{Angst} in its original form, because it has no object to be afraid of; it is portentous, because it is inevitable. It is a chasm, a precipice confronting the existent (“der Abgrund des Daseins”), whether or not the moral being only, the spirit and religion of man alone, can “fill it up.”\textsuperscript{53}

Long before Kierkegaard, as duly asserted by Herbert Read,\textsuperscript{54} Cole-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{50} Cf. Muirhead, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 108. Almost in a similar vein, Sartre, in his theory of \textit{cogito}, presupposes the existence of others than self, making it one of the essential conditions of one’s existence in the world and thus ascribing a sort of ethical value and humanistic feature to his atheistic existentialism. Otherwise, his theory appears to contain all the possibilities of being called an anarchism.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Coleridge, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 526.
\item \textsuperscript{52} \textit{Was ist Metaphysik?} p. 31.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Cf. Coleridge, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 526.
\item \textsuperscript{54} \textit{Coleridge as Critic} (London, 1949), pp. 29–30; \textit{Existentialism, Marxism & Anarchism} (London, 1949), p. 5.
\end{itemize}
ridge had formulated not merely all the main concepts of existentialist philosophy but all the essential features of modern existentialism, either Christian or atheistic. For the concept of "chasm," together with that of *Angst*, is one of the essential features of modern literature. "The abyss . . . which is bottomless," writes D. H. Lawrence, "the abyss of the immortality of those that have fallen from God."85 Paradoxically, what is immortal is not man but the abyss, the chasm. Not to be, then, is impossible; to be, incomprehensible.66 In a word, "naitre pour lui (l'homme) c'est vraiment 'venir au monde' dans une situation qu'il n'a pas choisie, avec ce corps, cette famille, cette race peut-être."57 Accordingly, "l'homme doit se créer sa propre essence; c'est en se jetant dans le monde, en y souffrant, en y luttant, qu'il se définit peu à peu; et la définition demeure toujours ouverte."58 Flatly denying the end of man in a similar vein, William Faulkner strongly asserts: "the precipice, the dark precipice; all mankind before you went over it and lived and all after you will."59

Besides this concept of self-affirmation, another inevitable outcome that Coleridge anticipated in terms of Nothing and *Angst* is *pantheism* which is identical with atheism according to his terminology,60 and in view of modern existentialism, his anticipation is not necessarily groundless. Even Sartre who flatly denied the existence of God as an absolute reality, has not hesitated to admit one's own existence as an absolute entity.

What then is proposed by Coleridge in anticipation of this inevitable outcome of pantheism is the law of *Bicentrality*, that "every Whole

55 "Abysmal Immortality."
56 Coleridge, *op. cit.*, p. 520.
... must be conceived as a possible center in itself, and at the same time as having a centre out of itself and common to it with all other parts of the same System."\(^6\)

Such a unity, his MS continues, should be considered as having a center either (1) out of itself somewhere on the "concentral lines composing a common circle," or (2) identical with the center of the Universe, or (3) within itself which is the "centre and copula" of a system of its own.

From these three essential features of Bicentrality, two opposing inferences can be made. One of them is that any bodies or number of bodies having their center outside of themselves are "inaanimate," and the aggregate of these bodies is called "inorganic Nature," because their centers are to be considered as the "General Laws of the System" existing out of the bodies. The other inference is to contemplate the existent as containing the center or principle of unity in itself, including the Universal Law. Life itself is such a principle, and these existents collectively constitute "Organic Nature."\(^6\)

Ontic or ontological, existential or existentiel, the law of Bicentrality is itself the final law which Coleridge was seeking in order to unite the subjective entity with the Immanent Will, "without which as its complement (,) science itself is but an elaborate game of shadows," beginning in abstractions and ending in perplexity, because "all true reality has both its ground and its evidence in the will."\(^6\)

The outward structure of reality as it really manifests itself is "la série bien liée de (ces) manifestations," "la totalité liée de leur appar-\(^6\)ences."\(^6\)

What then makes it manifest in a state of well-coordinated

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\(^6\) Quoted in Muirhead, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 122.

\(^6\) For a similar view in a different vein, see T. E. Hulme's concept of reality divided into three concentric realms based on the law of discontinuity (\textit{Speculations}, London, 1924, pp. 3-11).

\(^6\) Coleridge, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 524.

\(^6\) \textit{L'Être et le néant}, pp. 13, 23.
entity of appearances? It is, in a word, "Will," the will as the principle of unity in the many. It is absolute in that it is.

In conclusion, existence as a mere act of existing is, according to Coleridge, not merely its own predicate but copula, that is, "self-affirmation, the one attribute in which all others are contained, not as parts, but as manifestations," the entity of reality as it really appears in a series of manifestations representing the absolute will. It is also absolute in that it neither affirms ab intra nor is affirmed ab extra; it is the "identity and living copula of both," of the affirming and the affirmed, in a word, an immanent entity. Here lies the unique field of literature which begins where philosophy ends.

(Sendai, July 31, 1953.)

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65 Coleridge, op. cit., p. 525. Here again the close parallelism between Coleridge and modern existentialists is striking. Sartre writes: "Il (l'être) est une immanence qui ne peut pas se réaliser, une affirmation qui ne peut pas se affirmer, une activité qui ne peut pas agir, parce qu'il s'est empâté de soi-même." (L'Être et le néant, p. 32.) It may also safely be added that there is no substantial difference as to the existentialist interpretation of reality per se, whether Christian or atheistic, insofar as the structural interpretation of existence is concerned.