

Samuel Taylor Coleridge : The Founder of Nineteenth Century British Idealism

Abstract

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a British Literary thinker, who is known to be the founder of nineteenth century British Idealism. He visited Germany and brought home for its novelty, a type of Thought that was antagonistic to Benthamism dominant in Britain at the moment he carried with it the certitude that belonged to Immanuel Kant and his successors on the continent, just across the channel. However, Coleridge can not be given credit of being to representative of Transcendentalism in Britain for his 'studies' were of a very short duration. Indeed indeed there are short coming in the thinking of Coleridge. However he was in search of God. He Introduces God and holds that God is the Supreme Being. For him God is the transcendent, who lies outside and at the same time immanent and He is manifesting alone in all things. But intellect is not capable of comprehending God are Supreme Being. God is reveals in His manifestations. Hence, God is beyond the group of Thought, yet He is known through imagination. Such is the Concept of Transcendence-God or Truth which Coleridge adds to the mental perspective of the British philosophers for the first time.

Keywords: Idealism, Truth, Imagination, Supreme Being, Immanent, Autogenistic, Benthamism, Transcendent, across the Channel.

Introduction

Coleridge was a 'Literary Philosopher', Who is known to be the founder of nineteenth century British Idealism. He has been described as a "Star of first magnitude in fragment of Letters"¹ and honoured for having "Inaugurated a new era by his poetic idealism", the compiler of Chambers' Biographical Dictionary. In 1798, he visited Germany and, there, he spent a year in what are called by Rudolf Metz "Intensive studies of German Literature and Philosophy".² Consequently, he brought home, for its novelty, a type of thought that was antagonistic to Benthamism, dominant in Britain at the moment, but carried with it the certitude that belonged to Kant and his successors on the continent, just across the channel. However, Coleridge cannot be regarded as a true representative of German Transcendentalism in Britain for his studies, though "Intensive", were of a very short duration, but this is exactly the reason why he was able to utilize German thought, particularly of Kant, for the re-orientation of his native idealism. In the vain of Transcendentalism, Coleridge intends to replace by a new spirit the utilitarianism of Bentham, prevailing dominantly in the English Philosophy of his time. T.H. Green in his essay, "The Review of E. Caird, The Philosophy of Kant", remarks, "The current English conceptions of Kant have had a curious history. The last generation took its nations about him chiefly from Coleridge, and through Coleridge, if he would have expounded him as no one else could, he, in fact, did little more than convey to his countrymen the grotesquely false impression that Kant had sought to establish the existence of a mysterious intellectual faculty called reason, the organ of truths inaccessible to the understanding, on the strength of which such and ecclesiastical dogma as that of the Trinity might be intelligibly accepted."³ Obviously, there are shortcomings in the speculations of Coleridge, but being a man of philosophical bent of mind, he served to infuse British thought with the spirit of Germany. His thought is prophetic rather than scientific and, while philosophizing, he aims at "showing the necessity of replacing the machanical interpretation of life and nature, which was found in possession of the field, by one consistently spiritual, indeed religious."⁴

Coleridge was in search of the Spirit or God. He never lost his faith in it. Something forces him from within, Coleridge tells us, in his Lectures, to "a belief in God which cannot be destroyed, without destroying the basis of all truths."⁵ Therefore, he introduces God the truth which is

Mohd. Mustashriq Khan

Deptt. of Political Science
St. Andrew's College,
Gorakhpur

unconditioned and holds that God is the Supreme Being. He is infinite and personal, eternal and omnipresent. In his "Note Books" Coleridge writes, "The best, the truly Lovely in each and all is God".⁶ But the existence and attributes of God are mystery for human beings and are not demonstrable, either scientifically or by apodiction, due to the fact that God, according to Coleridge, is "no mere Amni Mundi, or First Mover, or Supreme Beings, no mere ground of the universe, or Fate or law personified, but a Being at once infinite and personal, the eternal omnipresent Creator of the world 'out of nothing' and yet at the same time self comprehensive, free, righteous, Loving, merciful, and a hearer of prayer,.... 'a living God'. The existence and attributes of such a being are necessarily mysterious to the mind of Man."⁷

According to Coleridge, God is a transcendent being. He lies outside, or beyond the finite things, though, at the same time, God is immanent as He is manifesting alone in all things. In his "Note Books", Coleridge writes, "God is with me! God is in me!"⁹. Human mind fails to grasp God for His existence is a mystery to it. It is in this sense that He transcends finite mind. God is not an object of thought, but it does not mean that man is completely dissociated from Him. Transcendence simply conveys that God can neither be spatially conditioned nor limited by the understanding. Coleridge accordingly says, "I cannot pretend to limit the powers of Providence. I can on the contrary see very substantial motives for the supposition that God acted directly upon the chosen nation, as preparing a receptacle for the religion which was to spread over all mankind, He did not in the meantime wholly abandon those who were here after to be taken into his church; but on the other ways, so distinguishable from the truths of revelation and the miracle that accompanied it, as not hazard the least confusion, and yet a sufficient pledge that wherever there was a heart that truly loved Him, there His assistance was given, either by means of nature or by inspirations of which we are not capable of judging".⁹

Intellect is not capable of comprehending God, for it does not know how God comprises the identity of being and becoming; or how subject and object are harmoniously synthesized in His self-consciousness. Coleridge says, "I understand not, how infinite multitude and manifoldness could be one. Only I saw and understood, that it was yet out of my power to comprehend how it could be otherwise____ and.... in this unity I worshipped in the depth of knowledge that passes all understanding the Being of all things____ and in Being their sole Goodness____ and I saw that God is one, the Good____ possesses it not, but it is."¹⁰ But, God is immanent and He is revealed in His manifestations. Thus, He is not above the world altogether. Coleridge says, "Let me live in Truth____ manifesting that alone which is, even as it is, and striving to be that which Reason shows to be lovely____ that which my imagination would delight to manifest."¹¹ Hence, God is beyond the grasp of understanding, yet He is known through imagination. In his 'Biographia Literaria', Coleridge, being a poet, holds the primary Imagination "to be that living power

and prime agent of all human perception, as a repetition, in the finite mind, of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."¹² Such is the concept of Transcendence the Truth or God which Coleridge adds to the mental perspective of the British thinkers for the first time.

Conclusion

In short, Coleridge was a man of philosophical bent of my, did much to introduce German thought to British Thinkers. No doubt, there are shortcomings in Coleridge's efforts, He Introduces God- the Truth which is unconditioned. Coleridge is indeed religious and never Lost his faith in the Supreme Being. Thus, the Supreme Being or God which Coleridge adds to the mental perspective of English philosophers for the first time.

References

1. Patrick, David, Chambers' Biographical Dictionary, P. 231, Chambers', London, 1914.
2. Metz, Rudolf, A Hundred years of British Philosophy, P. 240, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1950.
3. Nettleship, R.L., works of Thomas Hill Green, Vol.III, P.127, Longmans, Green and Co. London, 1906.
4. Ward, A.W. and Waller, A.H., The Cambridge History of English Literatures, Vol.XI, P.136, London.
5. Coburn, Kathleen, The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, P.362, New York, 1949.
6. Coburn, Kathleen, The Note Books of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Vol.2, (1804-1808) P. 2539, London, 1962.
7. Hastings, James, Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol.3, P.712, Edinburgh, 1957.
8. Coburn, Kathleen, The Note Books of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Vol.2, (1804-1808), P.3231, London, 1962.
9. Coburn, Kathleen, The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. P. 362, New York, 1949.
10. Coburn, Kathleen, The Note Books of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Vol.2, (1804-1808), P.2152.
11. Ibid., P.2092.
12. Courthope, W J : A History of English Poetry, Vol.VI, P.196, Macmillan and Co. London, 1910.