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# Coleridge's Influence on Modern Psychology

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## 1. Introduction

I would like to say that Coleridge is the first modern psychologist in a sense. He left many psychologically important pieces of writings, but they are not arranged in a complete system. As his philosophical thoughts, psychological thoughts must be collected and studied, too. When we consider his poems or proses, we really find his attention to the state of mind which we can now treat as psychological phenomena. As Coleridge himself described, he published 'Kubla Khan' from a psychological curiosity. Therefore, we have to consider the author's state of mind, when we study his many fantastic poems. Some of his poems include many psychologically important things as well as his psychological curiosity.

As I have mentioned above, Coleridge had a great interesting in psychology. When we trace his fragments, perhaps we will notice his psychological ideas and conceptions in them. When we read and study his poetry, it is very interesting to find his attentions both to literary and psychological directions. In his mind, he was always conscious of psychological phenomena during his poetic creation. In these days, some of the Coleridgeans have noticed his importance in traditional psychology. Moreover, perhaps Coleridge played many important roles in the field of modern psychology. Therefore, I would like to mention about his influence on the point.

In the early nineteenth century Britain, psychology had not a definite field as a modern science. Before then, I mean the late eighteenth

century, David Hartley (1705-57), from whom Coleridge had a great influence on his theory of association, i.e. fancy, was not considered as a psychologist but physiologist. In the late nineteenth century, Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920), established his experimental psychology, by publishing *The Ground of Physiological Psychology* from 1875 to 1887, and from this, in the true sense, an academic kind of psychology began. But before then, Coleridge frequently used the word "psychology" in his essays. In those days psychology was considered to be included in physiology, but I suppose, Coleridge clearly discriminated psychology from physiology.

## 2. A story of an insane girl in Germany

Coleridge was very interested in the state of mind affected by past incidents, which was awfully traumatic. In modern psychology, it is well known phenomenon to us as a problem of a kind of memory which people call subconscious memory. It is a memory dwelt in the deep sea or great little cosmos of human mind, but its existence was not noticed in the age of Coleridge. However, Coleridge noticed it in the late eighteenth century, when physiologist or, I might say, psychologist, never thought of this kind of memory. Coleridge was a forerunner of depth psychology in this sense.

In the chapter six of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge describes his story of an example of depth psychology which he heard at Göttingen. It was a story of a young girl of twenty-four or five who could neither read nor write. But when she was in an ill with nervous fever, she continued instantly talking Latin, Greek, and Hebrew very proudly. People said that she became possessed by a very learned devil. One day a young physician studied this case and his report made her ravings famous, then many eminent physiologists and psychologists came to the town to cross-examine the case. The young physician at length succeeded in discovering that the patient had been charitably taken by an old Protestant

priest and lived with him for several years. The young physician concluded that she had unconsciously remembered the old priest's custom to read his favourite books loudly across the passage of his house. She remembered the words of these books unconsciously. Coleridge begins this story as follows:

A case of this kind occurred in a Catholic town in Germany a year or two before my arrival at Göttingen, and had not then ceased to be a frequent subject of conversation. A young woman of four or five and twenty, who could neither read nor write, was seized with a nervous fever; during which, according to the asseverations of all the priests and monks of the neighbourhood, she became *possessed*, and, as it appeared, by a very learned devil.<sup>(1)</sup>

Coleridge had a great interest in this story of a young German woman afflicted by mental disease, and found a psychologically important factor which he usually thought to be a kind of problem of unconsciousness. At this time of the late eighteenth century, he already tried to analyse human unconsciousness, in which he found another mental world of human beings. He continues thus:

She continued incessantly talking Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, in very pompous tones and with most distinct enunciation. This possession was rendered more probable by the known fact, that she was or had been a heretic. Voltaire humorously advises the devil to decline all acquaintance with medical man; and it would have been more to his reputation, if he had taken this advice in the present instance. The case had attracted the particular attention of a young physician, and by his statement, many eminent physiologists and psychologists visited the town, and cross-examined the case on the spot. Sheets full of her ravings were taken down from her own mouth, and were found to consist of sentences, coherent and intelligible each for itself, but

with little or no connection with each other.<sup>(2)</sup>

This rumour of the insane girl attracted Coleridge's attention, and he would like to know the reason why she could speak such classic languages. It was a surprising thing for the most people of the town that a illiterate young girl spoke some words of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew which were used by learned scholars only. In *Biographia Literaria*, he delineates the story he heard at Göttingen, and describes the details of her classic languages:

Of the Hebrew, a small portion only could be traced to the Bible; the remainder seemed to be in the rabbinical dialect. All trick or conspiracy was out of the question. Not only had the young woman ever been a harmless, simple creature; but she was evidently labouring under a nervous fever. In the town, in which she had been resident for many years as a servant in different families, no solution presented itself. The physician, however, determined to trace her past life step by step; for the patient herself was incapable of returning a rational answer.<sup>(3)</sup>

The young physician succeeded in discovering the reason after his long effort. She was an orphan, and after her parents' death, she was charitably taken by an old Protestant pastor at her age of nine. She lived with the pastor until his death. According to a niece of the old priest, the uncle had a custom to read his favourite books loudly walking up and down a passage of his house into which the kitchen door opened. He was a very learned Hebraist, and the girl listened to his voice every day. She unconsciously remembered his voice and words he spoke.

This story was utilized by a Scottish physiologist named William Benjamin Carpenter (1813-1855) in his long titled book of *Principles of Mental Physiology, with their applications to the training and disciplined of the*

*Mind, and the Study of its Morbid Conditions*, published in 1879. He mentions as follows:

The following case, mentioned by Coleridge, is one of the most remarkable on record : its distinguishing feature being that the patient could never have known anything of the meaning of the sentences uttered :----<sup>(4)</sup>

Carpenter clearly states here that the following sentences are quoted from Coleridge. Carpenter describes Coleridge's story of a young German girl like this:

In a Roman Catholic town in Germany, a young woman, who could neither read nor write, was seized with a fever, and was said by the priests to be possessed of a devil, because she was heard talking Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Whole sheets of her ravings were written out, and found to consist of sentences intelligible in themselves, but having slight connection with each other. Of her Hebrew sayings, only a few could be traced to the Bible, and most seemed to be in the Rabbinical dialect. All trick was out of question; the woman was a simple creature; there was no doubt as to the fever. It was long before any explanation, save that of demoniacal possession, could be obtained. At last the mystery was unveiled by a physician, who determined to trace back the girl's history, and who, after much trouble, discovered that at the age of nine she had been charitably taken by an old Protestant pastor, a great Hebrew scholar, in whose house she lived till his death.<sup>(5)</sup>

From this quotation, we can easily notice that Carpenter did not write Coleridge's words as they really are, but he summarized them.

Carpenter was a professor at Royal Institution, and then a professor of forensic medicine at University College, London. Therefore, he was

then not so much a physiologist as a psychologist. He was very interested in Coleridge's story as a valuable example of the memory.

Carpenter continues his description for explaining the young girl's language ability as follows:

On further inquiry it appeared to have been the old man's custom for years to walk up and down a passage of his house into which the kitchen opened, and to read to himself with a loud voice out of his books. The books were ransacked, and among them were found several of the Greek and Latin Fathers, together with a collection of Rabbinical writings. In these works so many of the passages taken down at the young woman's bed-side were identified, that there could be no reasonable doubt as to their source.----*Biographia Literaria*, edit. 1847, vol. i. p. 117.<sup>(6)</sup>

All this of Carpenter's quotation is delivered from *Biographia Literaria*. As we can see, he utilizes Coleridge's story for supporting his theory "of memory." Although, the end of above quotation, Carpenter makes clear that his quotation was delivered from *Biographia Literaria*. But the sentences are his own. The length of the quotation is less than half of the original and he makes the story briefly and concisely.

But Carpenter was a learned scholar who had really read Coleridge's writings. He also refers to Coleridge in other places in this book. He considers that Coleridge's character of intellect was eminently speculative in the section of "Automatic Activity" as shown in the next quotation:

The character of his Intellect was eminently *speculative*. He tells us, in his "Biographia Literaria," that even before reaching his fifteenth year, he had bewildered himself in metaphysics and theological controversy; that nothing else pleased him; and that, in especial, *history and particular facts had no interest for him.*<sup>(7)</sup>

From these remarks, we can realize that Carpenter was greatly interested in Coleridge himself and his writings mainly *Biographia Literaria*. It is safely said that Carpenter was very influenced by Coleridge's theory of, what we call, psychology.

Carpenter also refers to Coleridge's dream. It is an important subject concerning psychology. I will refer to this later, but now we think of Carpenter's influence on William James.

### 3. William James and modern psychologists

William James (1842-1910) is thought to be a forerunner of experimental psychology as well as one of the founders of American pragmatism. He was born in New York City, educated in Harvard Medical School, and taught anatomy, physiology, and hygiene at Harvard (1872) and became a professor of philosophy. He established experimental psychology in America. Seven years before his famous book *Pragmatism*, in 1890 he wrote an eminent book in the field of psychology, named *The Principles of Psychology* in two volumes. In the first volume of this book, he mentions about Coleridge, and quotes Coleridge's story stated in the chapter six of *Biographia Literaria*, as it shown in the following quotation:

Experiences of bygone date will revive after years of absolute oblivion, often as the result of some cerebral disease or accident which seems to develop latent paths of association, as the photographer's fluid develops the picture sleeping in the collodion film. The oftenest quoted of these cases is Coleridge's :<sup>(6)</sup>

"In a Roman Catholic town in Germany, a young woman, who could neither read nor write, was seized with a fever, and was said by the priests to be possessed of a devil, because she was heard talking Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Whole sheets of her ravings were written



out, and found to consist of sentences intelligible in themselves, but having slight connection with each other. Of her Hebrew sayings, only a few could be traced to the Bible, and most seemed to be in the Rabbinical dialect. All trick was out of the question; the woman was a simple creature ; there was no doubt as to the fever.<sup>(9)</sup>

When we closely investigate this quotation comparing with Carpenter's one, we should notice the identity of the two. James says that he quotes Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, but in reality, he quotes from Carpenter's writings. These two quotations are one and the same. Therefore, we can understand that James had read Carpenter's *Mental Physiology* before he wrote his *The Principles of Psychology*. However, we should not hastily conclude that James never read real *Biographia Literaria*. Of course he read Coleridge's books. On the footnote to Hodgson's words, James compared it with the chapter five of *Biographia Literaria*.<sup>(10)</sup>

Shadworth Hollway Hodgson (1832-1912) was an English philosopher, and his chief work *Time and Space* (1865) was argued in the present case. It is clearly understood that James read the Coleridge's work very interestingly. Thus James knew a part of Coleridge's psychological thought through Carpenter. In this case, it is supposed that James read the Carpenter's work first, because both persons engaged in the same field and could easily get information concerning the newly published books of psychology. I suppose that on reading Carpenter, James was suggested Coleridge's thoughts with his works, then he was interested in the original work of Coleridge.

Therefore we may safely conclude the theory of unconsciousness was originated in Coleridge and activated by Carpenter, and developed by James. Considering William James's effects on Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) in the theory of depth psychology, it may be said that Coleridge indirectly affected Freud in this field. Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) refers to Coleridge in the chapter four subtitled 'The Aims of Psychology' in his *Complete Works*, though the editor could not trace

his word. In the volume eight of his *Complete Works*, a footnote suggests that the theory of unconsciousness described in Carpenter's *Mental Physiology* affected Jung to a considerable degree.

#### 4. Coleridge's psychological terms on unconsciousness

In *Biographia Literaria*, after Coleridge mentions the story of the young girl in Germany he writes like this:

--- and, that if the intelligent faculty should be rendered mere comprehensive, it would require only a different and apportioned organization, *the body celestial* in stead of *the body terrestrial*, to bring before every human soul the collective experience of its whole past existence.<sup>(11)</sup>

It is considered to be a kind of collective consciousness which Jung stresses in his theory of unconsciousness. If Jung noticed Coleridge's theory through *Biographia Literaria*, it should be said that he had a great influence from Coleridge, but unfortunately we have no decisive evidence so far in spite of a great similarity. From these cases, we might say that Coleridge indirectly affected modern psychologists concerning unconscious theories.

Coleridge describes in his *Notebooks* as the entry number 1554 like this:

Man exists herein to himself & to God alone / ---Yea, in how much only to God --- how much lies *below* his own Consciousness.<sup>(12)</sup>

This was said to be written in 1803. Here Coleridge noticed that a man lives and works not only for himself alone but also for God. God has a higher kind of consciousness which includes human consciousness. These words explain there are so many things below the consciousness

of man.

In the following description of number 1798 in his *Notebooks*, Coleridge mentions his discovery of another world in his unconscious mind:

--- of a great metaphysician / he looked at (into?) his own Soul with a Telescope / what seemed all irregular, he saw & shewed to be beautiful Constellations & he added to the Consciousness hidden worlds within worlds.<sup>(13)</sup>

This means that Coleridge considered, like a great metaphysician, the other world of consciousness deeply under the general consciousness, which general people could not notice, only a great metaphysician can realise its existence. It is important to notice that Coleridge was really thinking of the hierarchies of consciousness. This fact soon leads us to his own thought of the first and the second consciousness.

In the other part of *Notebooks*, Coleridge refers to his self-conscious and his perpetual feeling, which sometimes acts as his imagination:

I fall asleep night after night watching that perpetual feeling, to which Imagination or the real affection of that organ or its appendages by that feeling beyond the other parts of the body (tho' no atom but seems to share in it) has given a place and seat of manifestation a shechinah in the heart.--- Shall I try to image it to myself, as an animant self-conscious pendulum, continuing for ever its arc of motion by the for ever anticipation of it? --- or like some fairer Blossom-life in the centre of the Flower-polypus, a life within Life, & constituting a part of the Life, the includes it?

A consciousness within a Consciousness, yet mutually penetrated, each possessing both itself & the other --- distinct tho' indivisible!<sup>(14)</sup>

Coleridge mentions here "a life within Life" and "A consciousness with-

in a Consciousness," but these words belong to the two kinds of consciousness as above mentioned.

Thus Coleridge considered not only an ordinary consciousness but also a consciousness common to all human beings. In the case of Coleridge, from his religious attitude, he thought this kind of consciousness is to be a Consciousness of God. But it is really common to all people, and a century later, Jung developed it into a purely human consciousness common to all people based on myths or traditional legends, and he called it "collective consciousness."

It is not clear yet whether Coleridge's view of the stream of consciousness, which we can sometimes feel in his writings, affected James or not. But it is a matter next to investigate. However, Coleridge's thought on depth psychology is stated in his philosophical or religious books. In the age of Coleridge philosophy is closely related to psychology. He considered his psychological thoughts along with philosophical ones. His interests in unconsciousness are described in many parts of his essays and memorandums including his *Notebooks*.

Coleridge used new words for depth psychology, and recorded them in his *Notebooks*. In the entry number 576 of his *Notebooks* written in 1799, he uses "semiconsciously" for the first time:

Print, how interesting --- viewed in all moods, unconsciously distinctly, semiconsciously, with vacant, with swimming eyes --- a thing of nature thro' the perpetual action of the Feelings! --- O God! when I now think how perishable Things, how imperishable Ideas --- what a proof of My Immortality --- What is Forgetfulness? ---<sup>(15)</sup>

According to The *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "semiconsciously" first appeared in 1861, when Sir Henry James Maine (1822-1888), a professor of civil law at Cambridge, used it in his *Ancient Law* published in 1861.

Coleridge uses the word “under conscious” in the other place, but no same word is found in the *OED* second edition.

The word “unconsciously” was used in the same year of 1799 by Johnson L. P. Milton in his works. Coleridge might be the first man to use the word. The word “semiconsciously” first appeared in 1832 according to the *OED*.

In the entry number 2073 of the *Notebooks*, he writes like this:

Query as to the Posture of the Body we being semi-demi-conscious of it in falling to sleep, does it not act sometimes by suggesting the postures of Objects, of inanimates so that *I* could see them, of the animate partly so & partly so as they could see me & would look in on me:··· On a subject so important no Hint but deserves a Memorandum at least.<sup>16)</sup>

Coleridge describes here the word “semi-demi-conscious,” which was perhaps his original. We cannot find it in the *OED*, too.

Coleridge wrote many important descriptions concerning dreams. He had some curious and different experiences in a dream. His ‘Kubla Khan’ was written in a special kind of sleep which he called reverie. It was a very curious state of mind, but modern psychology solves this problem. It is one stage of sleep according to modern psychology, in which his right brain actively works. Coleridge already found this state of mind during sleep. Some psychologists who read Coleridge’s works would notice such state of mind, but no one mentions this fact so far in spite of repeatedly quoted “Kubla Khan” as an example of automatic writing. However, it is possible to compare his descriptions with the passages of modern psychologists.

## 5. Conclusion

As we consider Coleridge’s interests in unconsciousness, he was

really a depth psychologist in his age. To think of his abilities in the field of psychology, we can call him the first psychologist in England in the true sense. He left his pieces of thoughts on the mind of human beings in his main work *Biographia Literaria* or *Notebooks*, but he never constructed his complete system of psychology.

However, his psychological pieces influenced later psychologists as we traced above, and we can safely mention that Coleridge was a forerunner of modern psychology. Carpenter, James, and perhaps Jung were all his followers in a sense. Therefore, we might say that Coleridge was either a great thinker or a powerful suggester to psychologists of the later period.

From above facts we can conclude that Coleridge was the first person who strongly interested in depth psychology, and we can clearly admit his influences on modern psychology and psychologists.

#### Notes

- (1) *BL*, I, 78.
- (2) *Loc. cit.*
- (3) *Loc. cit.*
- (4) William B. Carpenter, *Principles of Mental Physiology* (London: C. Kegan & Co., 1879), p.437.
- (5) *Ibid.*, pp.437-438.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p.438.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p.267.
- (8) William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover Publication Inc., 1890), II, 681.
- (9) *Loc. cit.*
- (10) *Ibid.*, II, 572.
- (11) *BL*, I, 79-80.
- (12) *CN*, I, 1554.
- (13) *Ibid.*, I, 1798.
- (14) *Ibid.*, II, 2999.
- (15) *Ibid.*, I, 576.
- (16) *Ibid.*, II, 2073.