

ENLIGHTENED ROMANTICISM: THE EMPIRICAL THREAD IN THE ROMANTIC THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

The evidence of this study weighs against the common view of the relationship between Enlightenment and Romanticism (which usually admits their disjunctions and differences) to see affinities and analogous aspects. The study traces the Romantics' awareness of the philosophical idea of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume and shows how the writings of these prominent philosophers, particularly, Hobbes's theory of human desire, Locke's concept of the will, and Hume's view on morals and imagination, paved the way for the Romantics to formulate their own philosophy which is different to some extent but still has the strain of influence.

Key Words: *Enlightenment, Romanticism, Empiricism, moral philosophy*

INTRODUCTION

Though Romanticism has usually been considered as a counter-movement of the Enlightenment of the 18th century with its empirical doctrine, it is, however, a ring in the chain of human thought progress. Martin D. Henry gives a hint to such underneath relatedness between the two movements saying:

For all their differences, both the Enlightenment and Romanticism thought that through the individual the totality could be understood. But the Enlightenment believed all 'selves' were essentially *alike* and could think according to the same universal laws of ratiocination in order to reach the same conclusions about the universe. The Romantics, by contrast, were to stress the *uniqueness* of each individual 'self' and its corresponding power to fathom all reality by a uniquely authoritative vision or intuition. (9-10)

The writers of the great age of British moral philosophy- beginning in 1650 with Thomas Hobbes's *Human Nature* and continuing to 1789- have been categorized by Laurence S. Lockridge into two groups, the moral philosophers among them are Thomas Hobbes, John

Locke, and David Hume, and the literary moralists such as Sir Thomas Browne, John Dryden, John Milton, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope and Henry Fielding. The British Romantics merge these two categories: “ They are literary moralists- in poems, plays, and essays they speak to the great issues of normative ethics- and they also attempt in the spirit of inquiry to extend our thinking about ethics” (Lockridge, 41). Hence, it is possible to say that the British moral philosophers have, directly or indirectly, had their impact on the Romantic poets. This paper is an attempt to discuss what Lockridge calls ‘the relatedness’ of the Romantics to these thinkers with particular reference to Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume.

1. Hobbesian Spirit in the Ethical Tendency of Romanticism

Thomas Hobbes’s philosophical thoughts have been taken seriously by the Romantics. They paid attention to his writings with a noticeable respect. William Hazlitt, for instance, acknowledges that Thomas Hobbes is the father of ‘modern philosophy’. It is a characteristic of their synthesizing temper that the Romantics should take Hobbesian thought in focus. Discussing the philosophy of Hobbes and other moral philosophers helps them to formulate their ethical tendency of Romanticism.

For Hobbes, the two ruling principles that govern human life- desire or will to power and fear of death- are both egoistic. Hobbes says at the end of Chapter XIII that “The Passions that incline men to Peace, are Fear of Death; Desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a Hope by their Industry to obtain them” (*Leviathan*, 79). The third feature of human nature supporting the inference from the passions, in Hobbes’s view, is that the psychological makeup of human beings is largely, or predominantly, self-centered. When people, Rawls comments, deliberate about basic political and social matters, they tend to give priority in their thought and action to their own preservation and security, to that of their families, and, to use his phrase again, to “the means of a commodious life.” (45) The Romantics recognize the motive power of both desire and fear of death. They recognize also that the self’s vitality requires some components of egoism. Their complaint with Hobbes is that these principles do not come close to providing a sufficient description of human nature; there are other principles as well.

Affinities with Hobbes are easily found in Hazlitt writings. He gives a comprehensive portrait of human desire, the perversity of which is often Hobbesian in spirit. Lockridge refers to Hazlitt’s view on human desire when he says:

Beyond ruthless physical appetencies of hunger and sex, desire is seen in our will to power over others and in envy, the suppressed desire to exterminate one’s betters or the better of. His *Liber Amoris* (1823) is a casebook of the physical and mental imbalance induced by implacable desire. Elsewhere, he quotes Hobbes’s *Human Nature* approvingly on the self-

defeating nature of desire: “Seeing all delight is appetite, and desire of something further, there can be no contentment but in proceeding,” but no object of desire, once obtained, satisfies it (46).

Moreover, Hazlitt and Coleridge may exceed Hobbes in their estimate of human depravity. For Hobbes the anarchic tendency of human desire is our natural inheritance, and as he says: “But neither of us accuses man’s nature in it. The Desires, and other passions of man, are in themselves no sin. No more are the actions, that proceed from those passions, till they know a law that forbids them” (*Leviathan*, 114). Laws that forbid have no essential rightness but only a conventional one, as in the case with all human institutions aimed at bettering our dark estate. Hobbes’s conventionalist position- that good and evil are defined by the will of the sovereign- disclaims any radical sin in human nature; judgment of our motives and acts has no essential justification. What human beings are by nature cannot, in any event, be a matter of praise or blame. But as essentialist, Hazlitt sees human fault as a cheat on an original inheritance of benevolence, a culpable falling away from the better half of our nature. Hazlitt announced that he believes in the theoretical benevolence, and the practical malignance of man. Coleridge goes further than either Hobbes or Hazlitt in defining a radical depravity. In a profound sense, all wiling, as aboriginal and existential desire, recapitulates the pride of Satan.

Hobbes’s important treatise, “Of Liberty and Necessity” (1640), directly influenced Hazlitt and, indirectly, Shelly (by way of Locke and Hume); it might even influence Blake. Here their revision of Hobbes gives the human being greater power for both good and evil. Hobbes defines liberty as “the absence of all the impediments to action that are not contained in the nature and intrinsic quality of the agent.” So defined, liberty can co-exist with necessity or strict causation, and also with the agent’s incapacity. If he lacks the intrinsic power to move, he is still free, in the absence of external impediments.

Hobbes frequently speaks of humanly imposed external restraints as ‘hindering’ liberty. “To lay down a man’s right to anything, is to divest himself of the liberty...without hindrance from another.” (*Leviathan*, 81) He, then, illustrates:

Fear and liberty are consistent; as when a man throweth his goods into the sea for fear for fear the ship should sink, he doth it nevertheless very willingly, and may refuse to do it if he will; it is therefore the action of one that was free: so a man sometimes pays his debt, only for fear of imprisonment, which, because no body hindered him from detaining, was the action of a man at liberty. was the action of a man of liberty. (*Leviathan*,129-130).

Blake and Hazlitt part company Hobbes on the nature of freedom, however, and it is a major revision toward augmentation of human power and responsibility. Liberty or freedom for the Romantics is not only the absence of external restraints on personal will, whether from other

persons or from forces of nature. To this negative criterion they add a positive one: empowerment. The Romantics tend to think of 'liberty' or 'freedom' as requiring both the absence of external restraints, natural or human, and the internal power to obtain objects of the will. Someone mentally or physically debilitated is not free, even if permitted by all to do whatever he pleases. Ultimately, freedom requires the full development and exercise of distinctly human capabilities. Whether, like Blake and Coleridge, they believe in 'origination' that can free one from "Causes and Consequences", or whether, like Hazlitt and Shelly, they believe in theory that all acts are caused and therefore necessitated, the Romantics see freedom as empowerment. The human being is a more capable creature than Hobbes's natural machine, in which will is simply the last 'appetite' in the mechanically necessitated string of deliberations.

2. The Descriptions of Will: Locke vs. Coleridge

The philosophy of John Locke has been respected and discussed by the most prominent romantic figure, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He, as P.G. Epps indicates, "not only shared in, but led, early nineteenth century criticism of the philosophy of John Locke" (1). Hence, fruitful areas of intersection with the Lockean strain of philosophy can be found in Coleridge. The descriptions of will, for instance, set forth by Coleridge and Locke in representative portions of their writings, are based in very similar understandings of the relationship of the will to the self, despite having subtle differences which lead to significant theological disagreements.

Coleridge in his essay "Elements of Religious Philosophy," in the *Aids to Reflection*, declares himself to be a compatibilist, one who maintains that moral agency does not necessarily require the absence of causally sufficient antecedent conditions. For if evil arises from a diseased will, and if the disease itself is not the product of the will, then evil arises from the will as affected by the disease, and not from the will as such; and yet, if it is to be held that it is indeed the will, and not strictly the "external" conditions of the disease, which is responsible for evil, then it is necessary to assert both free agency and some level of determinism. Coleridge, like most who adopt the seemingly incoherent compatibilist position, asserts that "moral responsibility" is "a mystery *above* comprehension" (92). Others, such as Locke, would argue that it is a simple contradiction. Coleridge believes himself to have escaped the contradiction, however, by his compatibilistic assertion of the facts of fallenness and moral responsibility as defended by the appeal to "mystery," and argues that:

A Will conceived separately from Intelligence is a Non-entity and a mere phantasm of abstraction; and that a Will, the state of which does in *no sense* originate in its own act, is an absolute contradiction. It might be an Instinct, an Impulse, a plastic Power, and, if accompanied with consciousness, a Desire; but a Will it *could* not be. And this *every* human

being *knows* with equal *clearness*, though different minds may *reflect* on it with different degrees of *distinctness*. (93)

On this ground of clarity and distinctness and the rooting of epistemology in the facts of consciousness, Coleridge meets Locke.

Locke, like Coleridge, bases the cognitive philosophy in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, on the facts of consciousness. Like Coleridge, Locke repudiates determinism, whether in the form of mechanistic materialism or of theological determinism; he illustrates this by saying, “A tennis ball, whether in motion by the stroke of a racket, or still lying at rest, is not by anyone taken to be a *free agent*” (222-223). According to the natural-historical account in the *Essay*, as summed up by Myers, “all rational creatures have some minimally reflective awareness of a distinction between self and world” (633). In its native form, however, this experience is no more than a dimly felt intuition, little different from the perceptual experience common to some other species of animal. Then Myers concludes:

The native understanding is passive in the decisive respect, in that such rudimentary acts of inference or composition as it may perform are purely reflexive. It is clearly unaware of its own powers to analyze and compose complex ideas and therefore unaware of the difficulties involved in its reification of certain complex ideas. (633)

Locke’s disagreement with Coleridge, though, is squarely at the appeal to mystery which bolsters the compatibilist argument; and this disagreement takes place, not in the admittedly confusing discussion of the will in Book II of the *Essay*, but in Locke’s essay *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures*. He opens ‘Reasonableness’ by saying: “It is obvious to anyone, who reads the New Testament, that the doctrine of redemption, and consequently of the gospel, is founded upon the supposition of Adam’s fall. To understand therefore what we are restored to by Jesus Christ, we must consider what Scripture shows we lost in Adam” (4).

Thus, from the first, he centers on the question of fallenness, agreeing with Coleridge in rejecting what he considers to be the extreme positions. Locke defines two poles which he rejects: those who “would have all Adam’s posterity doomed to eternal infinite punishment, for the transgression of Adam, whom millions had never heard of, and no one had authorized to transact for him, or be his representative,” but also those who found the doctrine of original sin “so little consistent with the justice or goodness of the great and infinite God, that they thought there was no redemption necessary, and consequently that there was none” (4-5). The latter, seems to address, as Coleridge did, the Cambridge Platonists—whose best-known spokesman was Locke’s pupil Shaftesbury; while the former represents the federal theory, the Calvinist explanation of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin. In rejecting the former,

Locke assumes an incompatibilist model of moral responsibility; in the latter, he agrees with Coleridge that some sense of fallenness is necessary to Christian thought.

Locke, however, is more consistent on this point than Coleridge; for Coleridge asserts that the will is “diseased.” Locke, on the other hand, sees no implication for the will in the idea of fallenness; rather, “though all die in Adam, yet none are truly punished, but for their own deeds”; “Adam being . . . turned out of paradise, and all his posterity born out of it, . . . all men should die, and remain under death forever, and so be utterly lost” (9). Redemption, then, is primarily to be understood in terms of Resurrection. Therefore, he rejects the views of those who speak of a state of “necessary sinning, and provoking God” (6). Locke recognizes no middle ground between the two positions.

Ultimately, all comparison of Locke and Coleridge on the idea of Will rests on the theological problem of original sin, rather than on the semantics of their philosophies. Both Locke and Coleridge deny that it is possible to consistently consider Will as a separable part of the Self; Locke argues that the question, “is the will free?” is malformed: the question is whether the person is free, and will is a description of the act of choosing undertaken by free agents. Coleridge more boldly (though with less specificity) asserts that Will and Self are coextensive. When the idea of an effect on the Will wrought by Adam’s fall is brought into the theological context, however, Locke and Coleridge begin to vary widely. Coleridge, claiming to represent Christian orthodoxy, asserts a compatibilist model of moral responsibility, defended by the appeal to theological “mystery”; while Locke, retaining an incompatibilist model of moral responsibility, claims to represent what “one that, . . . unbiased, reads the Scriptures” will discover. Locke’s defense of Scriptural over historical orthodoxy marks him as more nearly Fundamentalist, in the formal sense, than Coleridge; and it leaves to his readers, as to Coleridge’s, the question of whether theological “mystery” is truly a satisfactory justification for the compatibilism required by moderate forms of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin.

3. Hume’s Empirical Concepts: A Center of Romantic Argument

David Hume was a center of consideration by the Romantics who dealt argumentatively with his philosophical concepts. Whether they agree with or reject his ideas, the part of influence is obvious, particularly in terms of impressions, imagination, ideas and morality.

The concept of imagination has been treated within philosophy and literary criticism. Imagination especially became prominent together with the rise of the 18th century epistemology, theories of association and psychological philosophy. Romanticism as a paradigm switch from rationalist classicism towards subjectivism tried to unite in a series of attempts the different aspects of the concept of imagination and of their theoretical analysis.



Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature* said that all experience could ultimately be reduced to the impressions that are produced by the external world on our sensory organs. In course of time, the impressions get jaded and dimmed, when they are called ideas. Hence, Hume stamps impressions on the mind, preceding ideas. Consequently, ideas are indebted to impressions for their origin. Thus, impressions make ideas, and as Hume indicates in “Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles” that: “all our ideas are nothing but copies of our impressions, in other words, that it is impossible for us to think of anything, which we have not antecedently felt, either by our external or internal senses” (62). Ideas are of two categories: simple and complex. Hardness, coldness, particular single colours, etc. are examples of the single idea. Complex ideas grow out of compounded simple ideas.

Both Hartley and Hume claimed that compounding of a plurality of simple ideas follow some principles of compounding or association, such as the principles of resemblance, contiguity, causality, etc. They said that the simple and complex ideas constitute what we call experience. The Romantic poets rejected the idea of imagination as a faculty of combining and associating ideas. They are unanimous in claiming for it a much more faculty exalted position. For them, the imagination is a truly creative faculty; rather than simply rearranging materials fed to it by the senses and the memory, the imagination is a shaping and ordering power, a modifying power which colours objects of sense with the mind’s own light. Thus a ‘perception’- that is the product resulting from the modified combination of perceiver and the thing perceived- is neither a subject (perceiver) nor an object (thing perceived) exclusively, but it is the most original union of both.

Coleridge in his youth accepted Hume’s theory of experience in which mind is absolutely passive; it has no other alternative but to see, feel, hear, etc. only according as the external world produces impressions on our sense organs. We cannot, for instance, see a patch of cloud in the sky as a boar or a bison, but as what it is- a patch of cloud of a particular shape. Such a theory of perception or experience denied the efficacy; nay it all together denied even the existence of our imaginative faculty. The flaw of this theory- its denial of the imaginative faculty- was shown to Coleridge by Wordsworth. After Coleridge struck a friendship with Wordsworth, one day Coleridge was awe-struck listening to Wordsworth’s recitation of a manuscript of a poem of his (Wordsworth’s). Coleridge could immediately perceive the fine balance of truth in observing, with imaginative faculty modifying the objects observed. He could there and then realize that our imagination is capable of modifying the raw materials of our perception or experience- our ideas (in the sense of Hume and Hartley) that are produced in us by objects of the external world. His blunder of believing absolutely in the Humean psychology of the passivity of the mind was corrected by his listening to Wordsworth’s recitation, and Wordsworth’s affectionate teaching and guiding in the unrevealed and unchartered region of the powerful faculty of imagination in our mind (Sarkar, 406).

William Blake's view on imagination was strengthened by the religious consideration. For him, it is the very source of spiritual energy and when the poet exercises it, he in some way partakes of the activity of God. In this respect, Blake says: "This World of imagination is the world of Eternity; it is the divine bosom into which we shall go after the death of the vegetated body. This World of Imagination is Infinite and Eternal, whereas the World of Generation, or vegetation, is finite and Temporal" (Web). Hence, the imagination is nothing less than God as he operates in the human soul.

For Shelly, the imagination is the most important faculty of the human mind. Unlike the reason, which is analytic and mechanical, the imagination is synthetic and organic; moreover, the imagination works for man's moral good and allows a man to put himself in the place of others. Although all men possess imagination in some degree, the faculty is pre-eminent in poets.

3.1. The Moral Sense

It is easy to see why the Romantics express no hostility to the term 'moral sense'. They enter their own brief against the rationalists, do not denigrate sense experience or analogies based on it, and conceive an interaction of the ethical and the aesthetics. For them 'moral sense', like 'moral beauty', is no oxymoron. But the term 'moral sense' is rendered largely obsolete by 'imagination', which has, like the moral sense, a valuing power: 'Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and a whole" (Shelley, 12). Shelley's formulation echoes Hume's distinction the functions of reason and moral sentiment. Imagination is also like moral sense, a motivational power. He further indicates that the great instrument of 'moral good' is imagination. Poetry strengthens the faculty of imagination which is the organ of the moral nature, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.

The Romantic imagination's claim to truth as well as beauty and goodness counters the non-cognitivism of Humean moral sentiment and the subjectivism of moral sense as usually described. Imagination appropriates the powers that the moral rationalists ascribe to reason and judgment. "Although the Romantics are often taken to be subjectivist, it is noteworthy that none of them is an ethical relativist. Their stubborn belief in intuition wards off the relativistic implications of moral sense" (Lockridge, 58).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it becomes clear that the Romantics were aware of the philosophical ideas of Hobbes, Locke and Hume as shown in their arguments, comments and discussions of these thoughts. The writings of these prominent philosophers, particularly, Hobbes's theory of human desire, Locke's concept of the will, and Hume's view on morals and imagination,

paved the way for the Romantics to formulate their own philosophy which is different to some extent but still has the strain of influence. The principles which govern the human life i.e. motive power of desire and fear of death as stated by Hobbes have been recognized by the Romantics, particularly, Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Shelly. In their descriptions of the will, Locke and Coleridge show some kind of similarity which Coleridge acknowledged in his writings. David Hume's declaration that all experience is reduced to impressions which develop to become ideas has a vital role, directly or indirectly, in forming the Romantics' tendency towards imagination.

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