

Sample Prospectus for the Interpretive Essay

Two Spinozist Themes in Coleridge's Theory of Poetry

1. Lyric Poetry and the Emotions: Understanding as Therapy

In the Preface to *Poems* (1796 and 1797) Samuel Taylor Coleridge defends the poetical representation of particular emotive experiences on psychological, metaphysical, and aesthetic grounds. Both the psychological and metaphysical warrants have distinctly Spinozist origins. In the first case, Coleridge argues that

The communicativeness of our Nature leads us to describe our own sorrows; in the endeavour to describe them, intellectual activity is exerted; and from intellectual activity there results a pleasure, which is gradually associated, and mingles as a corrective with the painful subject of the description.

Although highly condensed, the above argument follows the lineaments of Spinoza's general theory of human emotion in *Ethica III*, as well as his specific accounts of human suffering in *Ethica IV* (as bondage to confused ideas and therefore painful emotions) and human liberation in *Ethica V* (by way of clear and distinct ideas, and the transformation of human affects into intellectual love--*amor intellectualis*). Note that Coleridge's argument contains five distinct assertions:

- (a) The communicativeness of our Nature leads us to describe our own sorrows.
- (b) In the endeavor to describe them, intellectual activity is exerted.
- (c) From intellectual activity results a pleasure.
- (d) Intellectual pleasures not only mingle with painful emotions, but
- (e) Displace them, thereby reducing human suffering.

Each of these assertions can be correlated with specific propositions in Spinoza's *Ethics*, the most salient of which comprise the following:

From *Ethica III (Concerning the Origin and Nature of the Emotions)*

- Prop. 16. From the mere fact that we imagine a thing to have something similar to an object that is wont to affect the mind with pleasure or pain, we shall love it or hate it, although the point of similarity is not the efficient cause of these emotions.
- Prop. 17. If we imagine that a thing which is wont to affect us with an emotion of pain, has something similar to another thing which is wont to affect us with an equally great emotion of pleasure, we shall hate it and love it at the same time.
- Prop. 18. From the image of a thing past or future man is affected by the same emotion of pleasure or pain as from the image of a thing present.
- Prop. 28. We endeavor to bring about whatever we imagine to be conducive to pleasure; but we endeavor to remove or destroy whatever we imagine to be opposed to pleasure and conducive to pain.
- Prop. 36. He who recalls a thing which once afforded him pleasure desires to possess the same thing in the same circumstances as when he first took pleasure therein.

Prop. 44. Hatred that is fully overcome by love passes into love and the love will therefore be greater than if it had not been preceded by hatred.

Prop. 54. The mind endeavors to think only of the things that affirm its power of activity

Prop. 59. Among all the emotions that are related to the mind in so far as it is active, there are none that are not related to pleasure or desire.

From *Ethica IV (Of Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions)*

Prop. 7. An emotion cannot be checked or destroyed except by a contrary emotion which is stronger than the emotion which is to be checked.

Prop. 8. Knowledge of good and evil is nothing other than the emotion of pleasure or pain in so far as we are conscious of it.

Prop. 14. No emotion can be checked by the true knowledge of good and evil in so far as it is true, but only in so far as it is considered an emotion.

Prop. 18. Desire arising from pleasure is, other things being equal, stronger than desire arising from pain.

Prop. 26. Whatever we endeavor according to reason is nothing else but to understand; and the mind, in so far as it exercises reason, judges nothing else to be to its advantage except what conduces to understanding.

From *Ethica V (Of the Power of the Intellect, or of Human Freedom)*

Prop. 2. If we remove an agitation of the mind, or emotion, from the thought of its external cause, and join it to other thoughts, then love or hatred towards the external cause, and also vacillations, that arise from these emotions will be destroyed.

Prop. 3. A passive emotion ceases to be a passive emotion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it.

Prop. 11. In proportion as a mental image is related to more things, the more frequently does it occur--i.e., the more often it springs to life--and the more it engages the mind.

Prop. 15. He who clearly and distinctly understands himself and his emotions loves God, and the more so the more he understands himself and his emotions.

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2. Lyric Poetry and Nominalism

In the second case, Coleridge's defense of the lyrical representation of particular emotive experiences rests on metaphysical grounds. Here, Coleridge considers the objection that lyric poetry, because it renders palpable only the unique pleasures or pains of a solitary individual, lacks general import:

'True!' (it may be answered) 'but how are the Public interested in your Sorrows or your Description?' We are for ever attributing personal Unities to imaginary Aggregates. What is the Public, but a term for a number of scattered individuals? Of whom as many will be interested in these sorrows, as have experienced the same or similar.

Again, the argument is highly condensed, but follows along the same lines as those presented in Spinoza's affirmation of metaphysical nominalism in the *Ethics*. Although Spinoza upholds nominalist

scruples in various contexts (e.g., as a lemma towards showing that human volitions are not free but caused by particular chains of events; *see* E2P49), his overall account of the relation between general terms and individual things is most thoroughly treated in the second scholium to E1P8, the essential purport of which is that only individual things exist.

In both Spinoza and Coleridge, nominalism is argued as more than a negative restriction on the import of general terms or linguistic abstraction; nominalism also accounts for the power of the knowledge of particular things to transform human understanding and therefore engender human liberation from bondage to the emotions. The propositions that best express this view in Spinoza appear in *Ethica V*:

Prop. 24. The more we understand particular things, the more we understand God.

Prop. 25. The highest conatus of the mind and its highest virtue is to understand things by the third kind of knowledge [what Spinoza calls, *scientia intuitiva*].

Prop. 32. We take pleasure in whatever we understand by the third kind of knowledge, and this is accompanied by the idea of God as the cause.

Prop. 38. The greater the number of things the mind understands by the second [what Spinoza calls, *ratio*] and third kinds of knowledge, the less subject it is to emotions that are bad, and the less it fears death.

The two themes, nominalism and intellectual love, are clearly interrelated: both are essential to Spinoza's account of the emendation of human understanding as the highest form of psychotherapy; likewise, both are essential to Coleridge's defense of lyric poetry.