JOHN STUART MILL
1806–1873

From Coleridge

The name of Coleridge is one of the few English names of our time which are likely to be oftener pronounced, and to become symbolical of more important things, in proportion as the inward workings of the age manifest themselves more and more in outward facts. Bentham excepted, no Englishman of recent date has left his impress so deeply in the opinions and mental tendencies of those among us who attempt to enlighten their practice by philosophical meditation. If it be true, as Lord Bacon affirms, that a knowledge of the speculative opinions of the men between twenty and thirty years of age is the great source of political prophecy, the existence of Coleridge will show itself by no slight or ambiguous traces in the coming history of our country; for no one has contributed more to shape the opinions of those among its younger men, who can be said to have opinions at all.

The influence of Coleridge, like that of Bentham, extends far beyond those who share in the peculiarities of his religious or philosophical creed. He has been the great awakener in this country of the spirit of philosophy, within the bounds of traditional opinions. He has been, almost as truly as Bentham, “the great questioner of things established”; for a questioner needs not necessarily be an enemy. By Bentham, beyond all others, men have been led to ask themselves, in regard to any ancient or received opinion, Is it true? and by Coleridge, What is the meaning of it? The one took his stand outside the received opinion, and surveyed it as an entire stranger to it: the other looked at it from within, and endeavored to see it with the eyes of a believer in it; to discover by what apparent facts it was at first suggested, and by what appearances it has ever since been rendered continually credible—has seemed, to a succession of persons, to be a faithful interpretation of their experience. Bentham judged a proposition true or false as it accorded or not with the result of his own inquiries; and did not search very curiously into what might be meant by the proposition, when it obviously did not mean what he thought true. With Coleridge, on the contrary, the very fact that any doctrine had been believed by thoughtful men, and received by whole nations or generations of mankind, was part of the problem to be solved; was one of the phenomena to be accounted for. And, as Bentham’s short and easy method of referring all to the selfish interests of aristocracies or priests or lawyers, or some other species of imposters, could not satisfy a man who saw so much farther into the complexities of the human intellect and feelings, he considered the long or extensive prevalence of any opinion as a presumption that it was not altogether a fallacy; that, to its first authors at least, it was the result of a struggle to express in...
words something which had a reality to them, though perhaps not to many of
those who have since received the doctrine by mere tradition. The long dura-
tion of a belief, he thought, is at least proof of an adaptation in it to some por-
tion or other of the human mind: and if, on digging down to the root, we do
not find, as is generally the case, some truth, we shall find some natural want
or requirement of human nature which the doctrine in question is fitted to sat-
isfy; among which wants the instincts of selfishness and of credulity have a
place, but by no means an exclusive one. From this difference in the points of
view of the two philosophers, and from the too rigid adherence of each to his
own, it was to be expected that Bentham should continually miss the truth
which is in the traditional opinions, and Coleridge that which is out of them
and at variance with them. But it was also likely that each would find, or show
the way to finding, much of what the other missed.

It is hardly possible to speak of Coleridge, and his position among his con-
temporaries, without reverting to Bentham: they are connected by two of the
closest bonds of association—resemblance and contrast. It would be difficult
to find two persons of philosophic eminence more exactly the contrary of one
another. Compare their modes of treatment of any subject, and you might
fancy them inhabitants of different worlds. They seem to have scarcely a prin-
ciple or a premise in common. Each of them sees scarcely any thing but what
the other does not see. Bentham would have regarded Coleridge with a pecu-
liar measure of the good-humored contempt with which he was accustomed to
regard all modes of philosophizing different from his own. Coleridge would
probably have made Bentham one of the exceptions to the enlarged and liberal
appreciation which (to the credit of his mode of philosophizing) he extended
to most thinkers of any eminence from whom he differed. But contraries, as
logicians say, are but quae in eodem genere maxime distant—the things which
are farthest from one another in the same kind. These two agreed in being the
men, who, in their age and country, did most to enforce, by precept and exam-
ple, the necessity of a philosophy. They agreed in making it their occupation to
recall opinions to first principles; taking no proposition for granted without
examining into the grounds of it, and ascertaining that it possessed the kind
and degree of evidence suitable to its nature. They agreed in recognizing that
sound theory is the only foundation for sound practice; and that whoever
despises theory, let him give himself what airs of wisdom he may, is self-
convicted of being a quack. If a book were to be compiled containing all the
best things ever said on the rule-of-thumb school of political craftsmanship,
and on the insufficiency for practical purposes of what the mere practical man
calls experience, it is difficult to say whether the collection would be more
indebted to the writings of Bentham or of Coleridge. They agreed, too, in per-
ceiving that the groundwork of all other philosophy must be laid in the philos-
ophy of the mind. To lay this foundation deeply and strongly, and to raise a
superstructure in accordance with it, were the objects to which their lives were
devoted. They employed, indeed, for the most part, different materials; but as
the materials of both were real observations, the genuine product of experi-
ence, the results will, in the end, be found, not hostile, but supplementary, to
one another. Of their methods of philosophizing, the same thing may be said:
they were different, yet both were legitimate logical processes. In every respect,
the two men are each other’s “completing counterpart”: the strong points of
each correspond to the weak points of the other. Whoever could master the
premises and combine the methods of both would possess the entire English philosophy of his age. Coleridge used to say that every one is born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian: it may be similarly affirmed that every Englishman of the present day is by implication either a Benthamite or a Coleridgian; holds views of human affairs which can only be proved true on the principles either of Bentham or of Coleridge.***