

LIFTING THE VEIL: IMAGINATION AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD
LECTURE 1 OUTLINE

**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM:
THE CARTESIAN DIVIDE**

“The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow ‘rationalism.’ Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.”

- C. S. Lewis

Fr. Malcolm introduces himself.

Introduces poetry

- “True poetry communicates before it is understood.”

Making a bold claim

- “The imagination, and the poetic imagination in particular, is a truth-bearing faculty.”
- “We can come to know certain things and know them more surely and clearly, things that are real and actually there, through the exercise of the poetic imagination balancing and complementing the analytical reason.”
- “Poetry can show us things that are actually the case.”

William Shakespeare

- “The imagination apprehends more than the cool reason ever comprehends. If it would but apprehend some joy, then it comprehends some bringer of that joy.” (*A Midsummer’s Night Dream*)

The Cartesian Divide

- Thinking prior to the Cartesian Divide
- Modern epistemology—an epistemological apartheid: we divide knowledge between objective knowledge and subjective feeling.

Rene Descartes’ states of being

- *Res Extensa*: the external world
- *Res Cogitans*: internal, “I think; therefore I am.”

God, angels, human beings

The unique place of human beings

If you have the frame that:

- Subjective = bad, merely individual, suspect, inaccurate
- Objective = totally impersonal, without any personal values and, therefore, true
- Then you can imagine that the history of the arts, particularly perhaps the history of the poetic arts, becomes entirely a sideshow.

Romantic poets

- By the time we get to the Romantic poets, we've had a century of Rationalism.
- The Romantic poets were a reaction to the rejection of the *res cogitans*.
- Coleridge was the thinker, the one who read the Rationalists.
- Coleridge and Wordsworth published the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, the first work of Romantic poetry.
- Twenty years later, in the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge recalls that they were trying "to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand."¹

Finding truth in imagination

- Guite discusses Coleridge's [*Rime of the Ancient Mariner*](#)
- ". . . my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith."²

The role of imagination in perception

- The stream of undifferentiated data and the imagination's role in processing it
- "The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the 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."³
- Coleridge held that our perceiving participates in God's creating.
- Some might suggest that Coleridge was a pantheist, but if everything is God then God can't have spoken it.

Coleridge came to realize that all reading is multivalent

- Coleridge realized that scientism was a form of literalism.
- Every glimpse of beauty is contradictory to the theory of meaninglessness.

¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 7, *Biographia Literaria* (two volume set), ed. James Engel and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 6-7.

² Coleridge, 6-7.

³ Coleridge, 304-5.

- The two great books that reveal God’s word to us, the book of nature and the Bible, were read as richly symbolic. They were understood literally, but that was not the end of it.
- People began reading the world literally and, in response, Christians started trying to turn the Bible into a scientific handbook. So they accepted the divide, and it created the situation where you had to decide on which side of the divide you were on.
- “A hunger-bitten and idea-less philosophy naturally produces a starveling and comfortless religion. It is among the miseries of the present age that it recognizes no medium, between Literal and Metaphorical. Faith is either to be buried in the dead letter, or its name and honors usurped by a counterfeit product...”⁴
- William Blake

How do we deal with the divide?

- “The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow ‘rationalism.’ Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.”⁵
- “Crediting imagination as a way of knowing is the beginning of healing.” -Malcolm Guite

Reason

Set on the soul’s acropolis the reason stands
 A virgin arm’d, commercing with celestial light,
 And he who sins against her has defiled his own
 Virginity: no cleansing makes his garment white;
 So clear is reason. But how dark, imagining,
 Warm, dark, obscure and infinite, daughter of Night:
 Dark is her brow, the beauty of her eyes with sleep
 Is loaded, and her pains are long, and her delight.
 Tempt not Athene. Wound not in her fertile pains
 Demeter, nor rebel against her mother-right.
 Oh, who will reconcile in me both maid and mother,

⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Statesman’s Manual” in *Lay Sermons*, vol 6 in *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by R J White (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 30.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2012), 175.

Who make in me a concord of the depth and height?
Who make imagination's dim exploring touch
Ever report the same as intellectual sight?
Then could I truly say and not deceive,
Then wholly say that I BELIEVE.⁶

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Poems of CS Lewis*, edited by Walter Hooper (Glasgow: Fount, 1994), 65.