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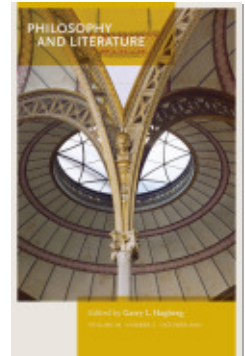
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ON KNOWING HOW TO LIVE:
COLERIDGE'S "FROST AT MIDNIGHT"

HOW OUGHT human beings to live? It is both hard to ignore this question and hard to see how to go about answering it rationally.

Moral philosophers have typically presented their works as deserving serious attention because they have supposed them to contain well-argued answers to this question. One very general way of describing the strategy of moral philosophers is to say that they have begun by attempting to specify precisely the sense of "ought" as it is used in this question. Thus "ought" has alternately been taken to mean such things as "would it be profitable for," "in society is it necessary for," "it is typical of ideal," and "would it be rational for." In concert, moral philosophy has alternately been conceived of as a part of a theory of happiness, a theory of civil society, a theory of perfection, or a theory of rationality.

But which, if any, of these ways of doing moral philosophy is the correct one? The very proliferation of approaches and answers to the question of how human beings ought to live encourages a kind of despair about whether any rules of conduct can be rationally justified for people in general. Noticing this proliferation, philosophers of a skeptical cast of mind have denied that any rules about how human beings ought to live can be rationally defended. All putative rational defenses of such rules, so it has been claimed, amount to nothing more than pieces of cant and dogma. Reflecting this intuition, "moralistic" has come sometimes to mean "priggishly preachy." Thus Richard Rorty has observed that "the attempt to answer . . . the moral agent's request for justifications [of answers to such questions as "What ought we to do with ourselves?" and "How ought we to live?"] with descriptions of a privileged domain [wherein such justifications can be discovered] is the philosopher's special form of bad faith—his special way of substituting pseudo-cognition for moral choice."¹ Moral philosophers, or those who would attempt rationally to defend rules about how to live, so Rorty would apparently have it, talk not good scientific sense and not liberating or entertaining poetic nonsense, but pure humbug. (Rorty adds that "the positivists were absolutely right in thinking it imperative to

extirpate metaphysics, when 'metaphysics' means the attempt to give knowledge of what science cannot know.") We are urged to take a pragmatic attitude toward moral rules. All there is to know about rules about how to live is that sometimes some people have made them up and found them useful, not that any of them have any deeper rational basis. "[T]he claim that the customs of a given society are 'grounded in nature' is not one which [the pragmatist] knows how to argue about. He is a pragmatist because he cannot see what it would be like for a custom to be so grounded."² Rorty does not claim that naturalistic talk or the talk of what he calls "atoms-in-the-void science" is the only sensible kind of talk. The remarks of sociologists, psychoanalysts, critics, and so forth are not senseless, according to Rorty. But he does hold that traditional philosophical talk of knowing moral rules through reflection or reasoning is senseless. The reason for this is that no one has ever succeeded in giving "ought" a clear sense in such a way that any claims of the form "human beings ought to do *x*" can be rationally justified to everyone.

Failing to possess incontrovertibly sound demonstrative arguments for claims that all human beings ought to adopt certain rules of conduct and failing to possess a method, or even a glimmer of a method, for constructing such arguments, it may well seem difficult not to feel compelled to adopt Rorty's skeptical attitude toward moral philosophy. Rorty's attitude is not extraordinary; it is increasingly shared by a public which fails to find in works of moral philosophy the sort of rational defense of rules about how to live which it has been promised. What form could a rational justification of a claim of the form "human beings ought to do *x*" take?

Yet to answer, with Rorty, "no form; all putative universal rational justifications are merely attempts to impress one or another unjustifiable ideology on others" is, it seems to me, to suffer from a failure of imagination and to misunderstand the character of some traditional moral arguments. There may be nondemonstrative arguments which are rationally compelling. Indeed, some moral philosophers, some novelists, and some poets, sensitive to the historicity of human life and to the failure of introspectionist foundationalism, have attempted to construct compelling nondemonstrative arguments in favor of some moral rules, understood as specifying what any rational person who reflectively considers his or her historical experiences of depression and joy will find it worthwhile to do. Moral philosophy so conceived becomes a theory of fulfillment for historical beings unable to justify rules of conduct a priori and subject to cycles of moods.³ Acquaintance with what one might call general subjunctive features of human temporal existence may enable human beings in general to justify moral rules for themselves. The possibility that moral philosophy might be based on such acquaintance is what Rorty overlooks.

Certain philosophers, novelists, and poets have aimed at revealing to us these subjunctive features, typically not simply by pointing them out, but rather by recording their own discoveries of them. Their revelations are designed to teach

us something about how to live fully or authentically. Among philosophers engaged in this enterprise, one might think of Heidegger or Emerson, or perhaps Wittgenstein; among novelists, Proust or Sartre; among poets, above all the English Romantics. Coleridge's poem "Frost at Midnight" is near enough to the historical inauguration of this enterprise in reaction to Humean skepticism to be worth considering on historical grounds alone. It also presents in a compressed and accessible form a picture of how one might go about meditating on one's moods in the hope of uncovering general subjunctive features of human life. Tracing out its progress can help us to appreciate the character of the enterprise and to test the possibilities it offers for resisting skepticism about moral philosophy.

I

Coleridge absorbs and even endorses the skeptic's attitude to the attempt to justify moral rules universally by deducing them from self-evident truths. But that does not lead Coleridge to conclude that no moral rules are universally justifiable. Coleridge is able to conceive of another method besides a priori demonstration for justifying rules of conduct. He employs this method to justify the particular rule "Devote yourself to reflection on the conditions of melancholia and joy and to teaching others your results."

Just how does Coleridge's method work, and is his justification of this moral rule a good one? To answer these questions, it is important first of all to see Coleridge as responding to Hume, whose views about the justifiability of moral rules anticipate Rorty's.

Hume observes in the first *Enquiry* that "Morals and criticism are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment."⁴ In the *Treatise*, he comments more pointedly on our inability to dispute rationally about questions of conduct.

But what have I here said, that reflections very refin'd and metaphysical have little or no influence upon us? . . . The intense view of the manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty.⁵

The only way out of this darkness which Hume is able to imagine is not to discover a *vocation* which banishes and redeems the darkness, but rather to put aside questions of conduct and take up an *avocation*.

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices in that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther. (p. 269)

This is not a happy solution to the problem of how to emerge from the darkness of moral despair, for some three or four hours later one's interest in reasonings about conduct is likely to reawaken, and to bring in its train the despair which one had sought to escape, now redoubled by the thought that its occurrence is inevitable even when one willfully flees it. Whatever interests and worries first gave rise to refined and metaphysical reflections are, it seems, not so easily quieted by "blind submission" to "follies . . . natural and agreeable" (pp. 269-70).

One may wish to escape the despair attending the realization that one cannot rationally justify any claims about the propriety of certain pursuits. One may wish to know how to live. But how could these wishes be realized? Is it not true that, as Hume argues and Rorty claims, we cannot know what pursuits are proper for us? Is it not the case that we will inevitably, like Hume, become dejected periodically, and is it not the case that all we can do when dejected is wait either for our avocations to distract us or for our bodies' chemistries to change? If not, why not?

In seeking answers to these questions, we may do well to attend to the descriptions of the travails of their lives produced by the major writers of autobiographical literature during the Romantic periods in England and America and by later writers who inherited their preoccupations. Such writers as Coleridge, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Emerson, and John Stuart Mill suffered through crises in their mental lives very like Hume's fall into darkness. The state of mind Coleridge and Wordsworth called dejection is precisely the subjective state accompanying the realization that one does not know, and may well be unable to know, how to live. Wordsworth, in Book XI of the *Prelude*, describes this state of mind in very nearly the same terms Hume had used in the *Treatise* for describing his mental crisis.

This was the crisis of that strong disease,
This the soul's last and lowest ebb; I drooped,
Deeming our blessed reason of least use
Where wanted most: "The lordly attributes
Of will and choice," I bitterly exclaimed,
"What are they but a mockery of a Being

Who hath in no concerns of his a test
 Of good and evil; knows not what to fear
 Or hope for, what to covet or shun."⁶

Unlike Hume, however, Wordsworth did not take refuge from his dejection in avocations, and he did not resign himself to the necessity of learning how to live with skepticism.

Depressed, bewildered thus, I did not walk
 With scoffers, seeking light and gay revenge
 From indiscriminate laughter, nor sate down
 In reconciliation with an utter waste
 Of intellect; such sloth I could not brook.⁷

Wordsworth's unwillingness to accept the notion that there is either no particular vocation for which he is suited or no way to know what it is and to adopt a policy of self-entertainment are typical of the writers named above. As M. H. Abrams notes, "[T]he distinctive Romantic genre of the *Bildungsgeschichte* describes a painful process of self-formation, crisis, and self-recognition, which culminates in a stage of self-coherence, self-awareness, and assured power that is its own reward."⁸ How one might successfully pass through this painful process is generally taken to be discernible not through abstract philosophical reflection and not through scientific investigation, but through meditation on the events of one's life. As Abrams describes Wordsworth's account in the *Prelude* of his achievement of self-understanding and self-integration, the "ultimate goodness governing the course of his life is brought into question by his suffering and crisis of spirit, then is established by the outcome of his experience, which is then represented as prototypical for the men to whom he addresses himself."⁹

That Coleridge, like Wordsworth, was continuously occupied with attempting to understand his place in nature as a thinking being and with establishing, despite the failure of introspectionist foundationalism, what pursuits are appropriate to that nature is evident in his correspondence. In February of 1801, Coleridge wrote to Davy, "I have been *thinking* vigorously during my illness, so that I cannot say that my long, long wakeful nights have been all lost to me. The subject of my meditations has been the relations of thoughts to things; in the language of Hume, of ideas to impressions."¹⁰ A month and a half later, he announced to Poole that these meditations have borne fruit. "I have overthrown the doctrine of association, as taught by Hartley, and with it all the irreligious metaphysics of modern infidels — especially the doctrine of necessity."¹¹ Thus Coleridge claims to have discovered both that he is free and that he has a place in a meaningful divinely ordained scheme.

II

Coleridge's discoveries of his own freedom and of a vocation fit for a free being are described most fully and carefully in "Frost at Midnight," written in February 1798.¹² The poem opens with the poet's calm, recollective recording of his sense that he is both somehow within nature and human society and somehow outside them or sealed off from them by his lack of an understanding of exactly how and for what purposes natural and social phenomena are produced.

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
 Unhelped by any wind. The owl's cry
 Came loud — and hark, again! loud as before.
 The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
 Have left me to that solitude, which suits
 Abstruser musings: save that at my side
 My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.

(ll. 1-7)

His attention skips from event to event in nature, from the formation of the frost to the lack of wind to the owl, until he is somewhat startled by the repetition of the owl's cry. That nature is capable of startling him reminds him that he does not live in continuous harmony with nature, that he does not know, and has not accepted, his place in nature, that nature's ministrations, to him and within herself, are secret. He takes others to be similarly situated in nature, to be inmates in nature alike sealed off from knowledge of her actions, yet unlike him to be at rest, free of worry about their situation both in and out of nature. (One way to understand the poem is to take it as recording the poet's attempt to establish that the gap between himself and others is temporary.) The poet revoices his sense of being both surrounded by and sealed off from nature and from others who are mysteriously less restless and better adapted to life in nature than he is as he thinks of

. . . Sea, hill, and wood,
 This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
 With all the numberless goings-on of life,
 Inaudible as dreams.

(ll. 10-13)

Unnumbered and inaudible, the workings of nature and social life and the poet's place in nature pass by his understanding.

Thus the problems the poet is reflecting on are those of how to still his restlessness, how to alter his sense of being surrounded by nature and society ("Sea, hill, and wood, / This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood") yet somehow sealed off from them, and how to come to terms with his desire to

know his place in nature and society. Nature, in her hiddenness (“’Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs / And vexes meditation with its strange / And extreme silentness” ll. 8–10), both calls forth the desire to know one’s place in nature and withholds its satisfaction. Recognizing this, the poet is forced to contemplate his desire to know and to query its motives, the possibility of its being satisfied, and the likelihood of its persisting.

Wondering then whether the numberless goings-on of life can be made to reveal their significance, and, if so, how, the poet’s attention is drawn to the only other restless thing within his notice, a piece of sooty film fluttering on the stove grate.

Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form.

(ll. 15–19)

That is to say, the poet finds, in looking at the film on the grate, an image of himself at home in nature. The film and his spirit flutter alike, yet the film’s flutterings are altogether natural phenomena, not sealed off from nature, but produced as part of nature’s secret self-ministrations. The film thus represents for the poet the union or integration of his own restlessness with the fullness and internal connectedness of nature, of, one might say, being for itself with being in itself. The film is both natural and alive; it “still flutters”—that is, its fluttering or restlessness is persistent, part of its nature, and yet not unsettling, but rather for it what it is to be still.

The poet, however, is unable to sustain his identification of himself with the film. It is not only a companionable form, but one

Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own mood interprets, everywhere
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of thought.

(ll. 20–23)

Such pieces of fluttering film were commonly known as *strangers* and were thought to indicate the imminent arrival of a friend. The poet catches himself suddenly looking at the fluttering film not merely as a thing in itself, but as something to be interpreted. Now retrospectively, contemplating his act of identifying himself with the stranger, he is moved first to recognize the difference between his own activity in interpreting and the stranger’s causally induced motions and then to reconfront his own restlessness and desire to know his place in nature.

This reconfrontation with his desire to know leads the poet to recollect similar confrontations with that desire, brought about by its disappointment, in the past. He recalls that he had, when young and at school, similarly looked at the film on the grate and invested it with meaning.

But O! how oft,
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
To watch that fluttering *stranger!*

(ll. 23-26)

This memory in turn leads him to recall that, just as he had in the present for a moment regarded the film on the grate as a natural phenomenon with manifest significance, he had in childhood regarded natural and social phenomena as obscurely significant, as imminently revelatory of his place in nature and of how to live happily in nature with a stilled consciousness, knowing his place in it and the pursuits appropriate to that place.

and as oft
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,
Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
From morning to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
Most like articulate sounds of things to come!

(ll. 26-33)

Thus human works (the bells) and nature (the hot air and his ear) conspired to speak to him; that is, they possessed significance in themselves, were in harmony with one another, and thus suggested that, by grasping their message, the child could enter into a like state of harmony with and within nature and bring significance to his life. Or, rather, human works and nature only seemed to be significant. Their sounds never became fully significant, but rather remained only "Most like articulate sounds of things to come."

The promise of these sounds is not realized; the child, after hearing them throughout the hot Fair day, falls asleep, and the poet's memory returns to his experiences of gazing in school at the film on the grate. The child, however, together with the poet recollecting the experiences of the child, has carried away with him from the Fair days of his birthplace to his school days a latent sense that satisfaction of his desire to know how to live has not been and may not be forthcoming. This latent sense is then reinforced by the experience, in which the memory of the sound of the bells is embedded, of gazing in school at the stranger. In school, the child takes the stranger to be evidence of the possibility of being transplanted into a world where he is at home and no longer restless.

And so I brooded all the following morn,
 Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
 Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
 Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
 A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
 For still I hoped to see the *stranger's* face,
 Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
 My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!

(ll. 36-43)

Thus the child's desire for nature to speak to him and care for him is literalized, as the child takes the film on the grate, a natural phenomenon, to have, or portend, a particular face, namely that of the person who will remove him from school into another world where he will be more at home. The phrase "the stranger's face" fuses the idea that phenomena in nature are obscurely significant and are preparing a place for him with the idea that there are others (townsman, aunt, or sister — familiars, yet strangers having knowledge he lacks) who already know the significance of nature, who carry that knowledge on their faces which in some sense then belong to nature, and who might lead the child into a new world, stilling his restlessness and making him joyful in his pursuits, as he is not in school. Yet the child's desire to be led into a new world is similarly disappointed. The poet's memory breaks off, the poet returns to the present, and the child is left in school.

Thus, what unites the three scenes described in the poem — the poet's present contemplation of the film on the grate, the child's hearing, or remembered hearing, of his town church-tower's bells, and the older child's inspection in school of the film on the grate — are the themes of the occurrence, frustration, and persistence of the desire to know how to live and of the consciousness of oneself as a restless interpreting being, a consciousness which accompanies the frustration and persistence of that desire. The recurrence of this desire, its frustration, and the accompanying consciousness of self have not brought about the satisfaction of the poet's desire to know how to live, but only the knowledge that it is possible to survive the frustration of that desire, even while surmising that it, its frustration, and the associated state of restless self-consciousness will recur.

Yet one last time, the poet imagines that he has, and might come to know and glory in, a place in nature, not in his life but in his life transplanted, that is, in the life of his son. He conjectures that his own continuing restlessness stems not from the nature of consciousness as such, but from the circumstances of his upbringing.

For I was reared
 In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
 And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
 But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze

By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
 Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
 Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
 And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
 The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
 Of that eternal language, which thy God
 Utters, who from eternity doth teach
 Himself in all, and all things in himself.
 Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
 Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

(ll. 51-64)

Here Coleridge, having reflected on the persistence — and persistent frustration — of his desire to know how to live by knowing his place in nature, seems to have satisfied his desire. He has apparently uncovered the cause of his dejection — life in London — and he foresees that his son, having been freed from the influence of this cause, will be free of dejection. The poet himself again surmises that events in nature, including the phenomena of human life, are significant, even providentially determined; God reveals himself to himself through them. Although understanding of the exact character of this divine self-revelation eludes the poet, he is nonetheless able, by diagnosing the cause of his dejection, to assign a meaning to his life and to envision passing that meaning on to his son. Thus, just as God, somewhat like Hegel's Absolute Spirit, through His work of creating all things teaches Himself the meaning of His own original yet undeveloped nature, so the poet, through his diagnostic recollections of his experience, teaches himself how to be a teacher to his son and how to understand the significance of his experiences as preparatory for his activity as a teacher. His proper vocation, he now surmises on the basis of his reflection on his experiences, is that of a teacher to his son.

Yet, despite the poet's sense of triumph in this passage at having understood and redeemed his existence, something remains not quite right. The poet perhaps realizes that, in identifying with his son and anticipating his son's joyful, meaningful life, he is once again anticipating, and failing to achieve, his own transplantation into a world where he will not be troubled by restlessness. Once again, it is the poet who is imaginatively assigning a meaning to events — this time not to the fluttering of the film on the grate or to the sound of the bells, but to the repeated welling up and frustration of his desire to know how to live — and anticipating, as a result, both further evidence in the future, in his son's happy life, of the correctness of his assignment of meaning and, through the appearance of that further evidence, the ultimate establishment of his vocation as a teacher. The poet has, again, imagined his present situation to be the first scene in a play the progress of which will inexorably reveal the meaning of that initial situation.

Perhaps then the poet begins to suspect that his present assignment of mean-

ing to his life and anticipation of his son's happiness are the result of yet one more welling up of his own desire to know how to live, a desire that may well be destined again to be frustrated. Unable himself to puzzle out God's self-instruction, he is again forced to confront the fact that his vision of what his son's life will be like is imaginatively constructed and not fully grounded. The triumphant prophesies of lines 51-64 are abandoned in favor of something more nearly resembling unknowing hope, and perhaps faith, that his understanding of his vocation and his son's future happiness is correct. He concludes both his address to his son and the poem by redescribing events in nature not as full of providential significance, but as having purposes mysteriously beyond human understanding.

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
 Whether the summer clothe the general earth
 With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
 Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
 Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch
 Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
 Heard only in the trances of the blast,
 Or if the secret ministry of frost
 Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
 Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

(ll. 65-74)

Here the poet's sense of the incomprehensibility of natural phenomena has reemerged. Nature's works do not speak to him, but are instead again secret, silent, and quiet. The wind, in its silence, entrances itself, and does not carry the poet away with it; he feels himself once again to be left behind. The recitation of the changing appearances nature assumes from season to season and the suggestion that these appearances are continuously evolving into one another without being sharply distinct combine to make one in following the images feel oneself, together with the poet, to be surrounded by nature spatially as nature's temporal self-development surrounds or passes one by. The repeated whether-or formulations leave the poet's summary in the register of surmise,¹³ indicating that the poet lacks confidence in his own ability to know what will happen when, and why. The poet's tone remains calm and optimistic. Yet the idea that nature will be sweet to or favor his son represents a withdrawal on the poet's part from the idea that his son will grasp God's providential plan. His son is now represented more as passively affected by nature than as wandering and knowing. The poet himself is unable with any assurance to predict the course of events in nature; nature continuously and fluidly develops herself, beyond the poet's grasp.

Reconfronting his inability to know either nature's plan or the pursuits for which he is intended, the poet retires into a more mature self-consciousness than

that which attended his childhood frustration of his desire to know how to live joyfully. The poet now identifies himself with the hanging icicles. As Harold Bloom reads the concluding lines, "The secret ministry of frost is analogous to the secret ministry of memory, for both bind together apparently disparate phenomena in an imaginative unity. The frost creates a surface both to receive and reflect the shining of the winter moon. Memory, moving by its overtly arbitrary but deeply designed associations, creates an identity between the mature poet and the child who is his ancestor as well as with his own child."¹⁴ The icicles are doomed to fall, not knowing why, just as the poet is doomed to die, he now surmises, without knowing for what pursuits he was intended. Like the icicles, the poet hangs, for a moment no longer fantastically scripting his future but rather reading his past. Yet he does not hang altogether at odds with himself or in the state of restless dejection in which he had found himself in like circumstances in the past. As the eavedrops combine with one another and reflect the nature which surrounds them, thus evidencing their place in it and drawing our attention, so the poet's memories combine with one another and reflect, to the poet and to us, his continuing existence as a being who wishes to know how to live, who fails to know how to know that, and who is nonetheless able to take satisfaction in the hope that others will find in his record of his experience of reflection, recollection, and self-recognition words to characterize themselves. Recollective reflection, it seems, may be an end in itself — just as the icicles seem designed in their glimmering to draw our attention — so long as that reflection shines out to others, instructs them, and draws them to it. The poet seems, for a time, to be calm, as he was often not to be, and well engaged in reflecting himself to himself and others to themselves.

III

It is not then that the poet has discovered a priori through reflection divorced from his historical experience the secret meaning and purpose of his own life, having thus refuted Humean skepticism about our ability to know a priori how to live. The skeptic's demand for an a priori demonstrative argument in favor of the rightness of certain rules of conduct has not been met. Yet the skeptic's conclusion that, in the absence of the satisfaction of this demand, all claims of the form "human beings in general ought to do *x*" are merely expressions of an unjustifiable ideology now looks flat and unconvincing. Coleridge has elaborated through reflection on his own past moods a theory of human historical existence and of what it is for historical beings subject to alternations of mood to feel fulfilled. He has sketched an account of general subjunctive features of human experience, and this account in turn makes a compelling, a posteriori, nondemonstrative argument in favor of engaging in self-reflection. Coleridge's account of general subjunctive features of human experience is plausibly *not* a special one, *is* plausibly applicable to human beings in general, in

so far as the experiences of desire, frustration, and recollective calm which he records occur *involuntarily*, despite his best efforts to plot his life in such a way as to prevent their recurrence. In their repetitiveness, they present themselves a posteriori as essential features of human life. As Mary Crenshaw Rawlinson has observed in commenting on Proust's search for essences, "the essence, the real idea, . . . cannot be separated from the power of traversing time which distinguishes it."¹⁵ The desire to know how to live, the frustration of that desire, dejection, and the transfiguration of dejection into hope through recollective self-reflection present themselves as essential features of human life through their traversals of time recorded in Coleridge's poetry.

Hume's skepticism has thus been absorbed into the poet's historically generated sense that human beings in general desire to know how to live, are frustrated in that desire, and yet can experience moments of hope, joy, and self-integration in tracing momentarily significant repetitions among events in nature (such as repeated wellings up, frustrations, and recollections of desire) and, perhaps more importantly, in imagining themselves to be anticipators of the experiences of and teachers of others. To live well as a historical being subject to moods—to be absorbed in one's pursuits and free of dejection—is to reflect others to themselves through self-reflection. (Here is perhaps the place to add that Hume managed throughout his life to do this or to conceive of himself as doing this rather better than did Coleridge. Hume did not entirely fail to live well, as Coleridge nearly did. Hume's failure, like perhaps Rorty's, is that he did not understand what his living well consisted in. Coleridge understood this, yet was less able than Hume continuously to conceive of himself as reflecting others to themselves.) As eave-drops may collect themselves into an icicle, hanging, for a time, silently, yet reflectively shining in the light of the moon, so the poet hangs "incumbent o'er the surface of past time,"¹⁶ perhaps knowing his nature and others', perhaps knowing which pursuits suit him and others.

Coleridge wins his knowledge of how to live first of all through his recollective discovery of the common thread running through his past experiences of dejection, namely the thread of the welling up and disappointment of his desire to know how to live, and secondly through his discovery of how, in envisioning the records of his self-reflections to be useful to others, to calm himself and free himself of dejection. Unlike Hume, Coleridge thought he understood and could make available to us the pattern of the recurrence of dejection and a dejection-concluding sense of likeness to and usefulness to others. We are not led by "Frost at Midnight" to form beliefs about how to live through argumentation or persuasion, the modes of belief formation which Mill isolated as characteristically employed in works of science. Rather, "Frost at Midnight" acts, as Mill says poetry in general acts, "by offering interesting objects of contemplation to the sensibilities,"¹⁷ in this case Coleridge himself. The poet's abandonment of a priori demonstrative argument grants the skeptic his case against a priori reason, while his reflections on his experience remove its sting. By presenting us

with a sequence of reflections on the part of a historical being, the poet is able “to indicate that his vision has been earned, that it can survive reference to the complexities and contradictions of experience”¹⁸ because it is generated out of them.

“Frost at Midnight” invites us to contemplate Coleridge’s particular way of making himself intelligible to himself and his particular remarks about how to live. Recently, Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that making ourselves intelligible to ourselves by telling stories about ourselves and others is necessary and sufficient for knowing how to live. MacIntyre claims that “we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out”;¹⁹ we acquire pictures of the ends or shapes of our lives by telling ourselves stories about them. “To ask ‘What is the good for me?’ is to ask how best I might live out [the narrative] unity [of my life] and bring it to completion” (p. 203).

If that is the case, then those who have attempted to tell the stories of lives — among them poets, who often narrate stretches of their own lives, and among them Coleridge — have something to teach us about how to live well. They can show us the unities of mood and activity possible in the lives of various people variously circumstanced. By doing this repeatedly, they can show us the unities of mood and activity possible for human beings as such. Together with other kinds of literature, poetry “articulates . . . form[s] of individual and social life” (p. 118).

Distinct individual lives need not always have distinct shapes or ends which suit them; distinct people need not always find dejection or joy while engaged in different activities. There may be such a thing as human nature, and, if there is, it seems that narratives of unities of moods and activities are just what is needed to show us what it is and how it bears on how we ought to live. Indeed, MacIntyre goes so far as to claim that all persons who, like Coleridge, wonder how to live have a property in common which makes a single, though very general, shape or end suitable for all of their lives. Moreover, the shape of life MacIntyre has in mind is the very shape Coleridge finds his life assuming: that of an unending quest for knowledge of how to live. As MacIntyre puts it, provisionally “the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man” (p. 205).

It is not the case that everyone will be moved by “Frost at Midnight” and so inclined to adopt the rule that we ought to reflect on our experiences and teach others about them. In this respect, poetry does not satisfy moral philosophy’s highest aspiration of providing incontrovertible a priori knowledge about how to live to everyone. As Mill went on to observe, “Poetry, which is the delineation of the deeper and more secret workings of human emotion, is interesting only to those to whom it recalls what they have felt, or whose imagination it stirs up to conceive what they could feel, or what they might have been able to feel, had their outward circumstances been different.”²⁰

But to admit this is not to deny that poetry can help to satisfy a very high aspiration of moral philosophy. It is not in particular to deny that each person

would or should adopt the rule “Frost at Midnight” recommends if only he or she were to reflect fully enough on the character of his or her historical existence. Poets do not compel us either through argumentation or experimentation to adopt beliefs. But it does not follow that they have nothing to teach us and that their recommendations about how to live are not rationally defensible. The rules they recommend may be defended as rules which we would or should adopt were we to come through reflection to understand ourselves as historical beings of a certain kind with certain kinds of moods. Teaching is not always a matter of either arguing or providing evidence, and it is especially unlikely to assume these forms when what is to be taught is a view about the nature of human beings and about how they ought to live. It is sometimes rather a matter of imparting a way of looking at things. A poet’s invitation to contemplate recognizably real human beings reflecting on their activities and moods seems to be just the sort of thing which could help us to discover the relations between moods and activities in human life and to overcome dejection. Thus, even in the absence of incontrovertibly sound demonstrative arguments for conclusions about how to live, we can and often do manage – rationally – to acquire senses of what it is for human beings with moods to live well.

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1. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 383.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
3. On Emerson and Heidegger’s views on “the epistemology of moods” and on which moods ought to be sustained and why, see Stanley Cavell’s essay “Thinking of Emerson” in *Essays in Kant’s Aesthetics*, ed. Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 261–70.
4. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. E. Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977), p. 31.
5. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), pp. 268–69.
6. William Wordsworth, *Prelude*, in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. J. Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), Book XI, ll. 306–14, p. 337.
7. *Ibid.*, ll. 321–25.
8. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 96.

9. Ibid., p. 95.
10. S. T. Coleridge, Letter to Sir Humphrey Davy, February 3, 1801, in *The Portable Coleridge*, ed. I. A. Richards (London: Penguin Books, 1950), p. 271.
11. Coleridge, Letter to Thomas Poole, March 16, 1801, in *The Portable Coleridge*, p. 271.
12. Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight," in *The Portable Coleridge*, pp. 128-30. All subsequent references to this poem will be given in the text by line numbers in parentheses, e.g. (ll. 1-7).
13. Geoffrey Hartman discusses whether-or formulations and Wordsworth's habit of surmising in *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 8-12.
14. Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961), pp. 204-205.
15. Mary Crenshaw Rawlinson, "Art and Truth: Reading Proust," *PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE* 6 (1982): 7.
16. Wordsworth, *Prelude*, IV, 272, p. 237. Hartman (*Wordsworth's Poetry*, p. xx) mentions Wordsworth's habit of representing himself as falling or hanging.
17. John Stuart Mill, "What is Poetry?" in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 3rd ed., ed. M. H. Abrams et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), vol. 2, p. 968.
18. Robert Penn Warren, cited without reference by Cleanth Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," in *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947), p. 212.
19. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 197.
20. Mill, p. 969.