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A Question of Identity: God and the Human Crisis in William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

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"I soon learned to separate theological prejudices from moral ones, and I no longer sought the origin of evil behind the world. Some education in history and philology, along with an inherently refined sense concerning psychological questions in general, quickly changed my problem into something else: Under what conditions did men invent for themselves these value judgments good and evil? And what inherent value do they have? Have they hindered or fostered human well-being up to now?"

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*

In his works, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Songs of Innocence and Experience*,¹ William Blake explores traditional constructs and philosophies of good and evil challenging the status quo and criticizing the way that humankind treats their fellowmen. Additionally, Blake points out errors in the man-made social and religious structures and institutions, and, the consequences—both good and bad—of these said structures and institutions. Blake addresses the identity and existence of God as both an

¹ Depending on the source, the book of poetry can be titled jointly as *Songs of Innocence and Experience* or individually as *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. As there are separate poems sharing the same titles, this essay will reference which individual book the poem in question came from.

individual entity and in the way that God is often presented by religious individuals.² God, in Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, is presented as absentee, both benevolent and malignant, partially limited by the coexistence of good and evil within himself, existing and acting almost solely through men rather than independently. This presentation of God greatly contrasts with traditional Judeo-Christian concepts of God. It is a God who, rather than perfect, is fallible, and often blindsided. In questioning the identity and existence of God, Blake provides both explanation and justification for the large disparities between those who suffer greatly and those who suffer minimally, presenting humanity in a state of crisis much like his portrayal of God, containing attributes of both good and evil. Blake questions the intent of human compassion and empathy. He paints humanity as largely self-serving, even in actions normally considered selfless, openly criticizing the duplicity and selfishness of human nature. In Blake's portrayal, humanity and God appear to be one and the same—humanity the active, tangible portion of the being and God the abstract portion of the being who empowers humanity.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake lays out extremely specific and non-traditional definitions of good and evil and relates them to distinctive elements of human existence and experience. He writes:

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that

² In the context of this research, "God" refers to the Christian God of Blake's England. Furthermore, the term "religious" references those holding to the Christian faith.

obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell. (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 3)

According to Blake evil is mental strength, the capacity for independent thought and action, reasoning and counter-reasoning. Natural, physical strength—such as an animal acting on its intrinsic strength and acting on (or obeying) his instincts, falls under Blake’s definition of good and subsequently, innocence. “The fox provides for himself, but God provides for the lion” (Plate 9). The fox’s behavior’s fall under Blake’s evil as he provides food for himself using mental cunning or reason, whereas the lion’s food is provided based off his God-given brute strength. The lion’s strength and power is instinct and therefore innocent and good. This presentation of good as passive obedience is viable in pre-fall Edenic conditions as the birth of good and evil is as inexplicable as the existence of Blake’s God who somehow fulfills both roles of good and evil. The idea that God is both good and evil harks to the idea that he is something, or someone, who does not adhere to being entirely benevolent or malignant, encompassing both forces of good and evil and explaining the absentee nature of God.

This God is the prototype for man particularly as presented in the poem *The Human Abstract* from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. In the poem, Blake writes of seemingly contrasting moral values and actions that coexist within the human individual. It is one of Blake’s most nihilistic and pessimistic portrayals of humanity in crisis as he breaks down the idea of human goodness and charity and shows that the lines between selflessness and selfishness are blurred at best, and, at worst nonexistent. Human motivation is the determining factor that decides which actions fall into the individual categories of good and evil, innocence and experience. However, human motivation, residing in the mind, lacks the

physical, tangible qualities necessary to subjugate it to analysis and criticism that would determine its true value and biases:

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody Poor;
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we.
And mutual fear brings peace,
Till the selfish loves increase:
Then Cruelty knits a snare,
And spreads his baits with care. (Blake, 1-8)

Pity, mercy, peace, care, and even happiness—no human motivation or seemingly good deed is left untouched by Blake in this poem. Although some motivation is more hidden than others, they all stem from the same primal human drive for survival and self-preservation. Blake asserts that the actions often considered as good are only reactionary responses to the ills of humanity with the idea that peace is brought by fear, love is selfish, and care is only a mode of manipulation. In these first two stanzas, it ought to be noted that Blake is writing this as an outsider looking in, donning the perspective of a well-off individual reflecting upon his own actions and perhaps even justifying his lifestyle. Additionally, Blake is writing this from his own perspective as an author and philosopher. From a cultural and historical standpoint, both perspectives are crucial to the readers understanding of society's attitude towards morality and hierarchal-type human relationships.

Songs of Innocence and Experience was originally published around 1789, a time in England when slaves were not yet emancipated³; children were sold to pay the debts of their parents, as is the case in Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper"; and the divide between the rich and the poor was ever-increasing in size, those who were poor being subjected to increasingly abject poverty and the rich enjoying lives of extreme and excessive luxury. The widening disparity between the two classes of individuals brought on Blake's extensive criticism and general questioning of morality. He finishes the poem by concluding that humanity is the place, the tree as it were, where all of these attributes (both good and evil) coexist.

"The Gods of the earth and sea, / Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree / But their search was all in vain: / There grows one in the Human Brain" (21-24). Using the tree as a symbol of the coexistent opposing morals within the human consciousness infers the viability of such a structure. Even though Blake establishes the viability of such a set-up, it's clear throughout these particular works that he expects humanity to hold itself to a higher standard than reactionary-based actions and pay special attention to those traits which empower and bring aid to one another. Blake desires that religion be an asset to humanity rather than something that causes yet more harm. Michael Slater in his article "Pragmatism, Realism, and Religion" notes the potential benefits of religion on the morality of an individual. "Through religious belief not only do our moral obligations acquire new force, it also becomes rational to believe that one can attain certain goods that would otherwise be impossible (or at least implausible) under the terms of a strictly naturalistic

³ In England, slaves were emancipated by the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. However, the slave trade was outlawed by the Slave Trade Act of 1807.

moral theory” (Slater 671). Slater is arguing that religion can drive individuals to do good they thought they were not capable of doing on their own (or perhaps even abstain from evil they could not otherwise abstain from), and, Slater’s argument is in line with the type of religion and religious action that Blake was calling for in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Blake exposes the hypocrisy of the wealthy and religious ruling class, challenging them to confront their own actions and to make meaningful changes within their society while also making bold claims about human identity: individuals construct their identity based off what they do with the traits that come natural—the tree Blake describes in “The Human Abstract”.

Similarly, Blake’s description of God in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is not as an entirely benevolent being. “Prolific; the other, the Devouring: to the devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains, but it is not so; he only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole. But the Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer as a sea received the excess of his delights” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plates 16 and 17). The so called Prolific and Devourer are two sides of the same divine existence, an entity encompassing all moral attributes while also not being consumed by either. Blake’s God is absent because he cannot maintain his semi-benevolence if consistently present in a world of suffering. Being present in the world as described by Blake would incite empathy within an even partially benevolent being and this empathy can only turn to action—and, action being energy and thus evil by Blake’s definition would throw off the balance that is the Blakean God. It is the innocent mind, or rather the ignorant, that believes action is always taken against injustice. Blake addresses this in his poem from *Songs of Innocence: On Another’s Sorrow*:

Can I see a falling tear, / And not feel my sorrow's share? /
Can a father see his child / Weep, nor be with sorrow fill'd
Think not thou canst sigh a sigh, / And thy maker is not by; /
Think not thou canst weep a tear, / And thy maker is not near
(*On Another's Sorrow*, 5-8; 61-64).

The lines read as seemingly innocent, a poem of reassurance through sorrow and suffering, but, like the rest of Blake's poems, a darker, more cynical meaning lies below the surface. God does not come to the rescue of suffering individuals. He is entirely distant from his creation, speaking through man in what Blake calls, "the voice of honest indignation" (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 12). Man's experience of God becomes deeply personal as he experiences God through himself and through others who have also experienced God. The divine becomes a part of man that man searches to find elsewhere. "Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast" (Plate 11). In his essay *The Significance of William Blake in Modern Thought*, William Clarke expounds on this philosophy of Blake's and the way it would affect his writing:

[Blake] had his moments of supreme joy when he "saw" himself taken into the "Bosom of God," which he identified with the universal prophetic or poetic genius. And these moments were no moments of total absorption into the body of the One: they were moments of the clearest intellectual vision, in which everything in his past experience became illuminated with new light and clothed with new meaning. (Clarke 220)

This philosophical approach taken by Blake made his own task in writing a part of that combination of humanity and God. Essentially, though God is absent on his own accord, he is present within man, and man has just to search within himself to find the eternal.

The creation of religion is man's failed attempt to explain the unexplainable relationship of good and evil—thus failing miserably. This attempt at creating new methods of connection with God that are all entirely artificial started with the attribution of deities and spiritual components and origination in nature and the result was steeped in varying levels of human corruption. "Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects; thus began Priesthood ... And at length they pronounced that the Gods had ordered such things" (Plate 11). This construct of organized religion is to Blake one of the ultimate evils and abuses of power. The abuse, deception, and manipulation of the multitude by the advantaged and powerful and the following justification of that prior evil provided for by this organized religion is the type of action that Blake rails against in *Innocence* poem, *The School Boy*.⁴

"How can the bird that is born for joy / Sit in a cage and sing? / How can a child, when fears annoy, / But droop his tender wing, / And forget his youthful spring" (*The School Boy*, 11-15). The external transplant of God into something found only through ritual and institutional-based religion was repulsive to Blake. He saw it as constraining and unnatural for humanity and for the divine to be so separated. Clarke writes on Blake's view of this institutionalized, church based religion:

⁴ Refers to *Songs of Innocence*.

The organized churches were, in Blake's mind, and perhaps truly, the greatest curse of the age; they had substituted for the religion of Jesus, with its ideal of spiritual and intellectual freedom, the religion of "Satan," the religion of intellectual and moral slavery to a God of tyrannical, abstract laws and in-comprehensible "Mystery"; and this antithesis to the religion of Jesus they were foisting upon the people in his name. (Clarke 221)

For Blake, it even made the absentee God more absent as he is moved outside of the natural state in which he previously existed. In a butterfly effect sort of way, this type of behavior and thinking cascades into such injustices experienced by the characters in the poems *The Chimney Sweeper*⁵ (in *Innocence* and *Experience*⁶) in which children suffer a horrible death and experience an even worse life at the hand of an industrialized society that has ceased to see the divine within the individual. The *Experience* version of the poem says it best, "A little black thing among the snow, / Crying "'weep!'weep!' in notes of woe! / 'Where are thy father & mother? say?' / 'They are both gone up to the church to pray'" (*The Chimney Sweeper*, 1-4). Religious ritual takes the place of personal, human responsibility for those over whom one wields authority—be that the relationship between foreman to worker, parent to child, or government to governed. In the place of guilt, a certain smugness lies within the religious believing that they are doing good while abnegating responsibility for their fellowman. "'They think they have done me no injury, / 'And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King, / 'Who make up a heaven of our misery'" (9-12). As Blake sees it, men are directly responsible for the suffering of other men as it is the responsibility of mankind to

⁵ Two separate poems bearing the same title.

⁶ Refers to *Songs of Experience*.

make earth a sort of paradise. This toying with the words “heaven” and “misery” in the last stanza draws attention to the full weight of responsibility Blake places on humankind in regard to human responsibility.

The close relationship Blake perceives between the identity of mankind and the divine requires an analysis of the nature of man to fully understand the identity of God. Blake focuses on this relationship throughout *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* but also in the *Innocence* poem, *The Divine Image*, writing of the divine attributes,

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress
Then every man, of every clime
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace. (9-16)

Humanity is divine. As Blake believes, the sanctuary, the resting place for God is within the heart and soul of man. Humanity so strongly bears the imprint of God—the image as it were—that in even seeking aid from the divine, humanity is truly seeking aid from God. This is one of the cornerstones in Blake’s ideology throughout *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*: it is humanity who is entrusted with the responsibility of caring for their fellowman. Humanity is as much God as it is human. The external movement from God to the institution of religion has not only taken the divine out of humanity but has also taken the humanity out of humanity and, in Blake’s view, this is

the source of much of the evil present within the world. However, to an extent, the existence of good and evil behavior within individuals is expected by Blake since the divine source from whence they came also has within it qualities of both good and evil. With this being the case, good and evil become value judgements rather than separate tangible entities in the way they have previously been presented by traditional Judeo-Christian religions, and, the absentee God within Blake's work begins to make more sense.

In Blake's eyes, good and evil are simply classifications created by humanity to explain the universe around them and make sense of their own behavior in the same way that humans classify any other sort of behavior in nature. With this in mind, Blake's description of an absentee God is the only justifiable explanation he could have provided considering his presentation of good and evil in both *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Likewise, Blake's description of humanity is bleak and devoid of any inherent goodness or inherent evil. Both exist without infringing upon the other as the two seem to be different phases in a larger circle of life and existence rather than the traditional ideas of good and evil. However, because of this, suffering becomes an inescapable part of the human condition, and perhaps a prerequisite for the system of humanity to function—thus creating the human crisis. According to the logic in "The Human Abstract" and the case Blake makes for the human identity, *nearly all if not all* injustice could be justified as life taking its course, after all, "Pity would be no more, / If we did not make somebody Poor" (1-2). Blake's writing on mercy, pity, humility, peace, and deceit breaks down the traditional ideas surrounding those traits and actions and asks the deeper philosophical and even sociological questions of motivation. He pulls together the information provided by this dismantling to find and describe what it means to be human.

In this light, Blake presents humanity not as broken or twisted, but as simply human. For Blake, this absentee God figure is present within him, impressing upon him the urge to rail against injustice through his poetry and prose and to harshly criticize the abuses of power. This absentee God is truly absent because he *is* humanity. For Blake humanity bears the essence of God, and—not only in a religious sort of sense, but from a purely literary standpoint—the two character identities become synonymous. This being the case, regardless of his tangible absence, Blake's God is incredibly present within man and is the essential mark of humanity, truly giving both humanity and God a complete and singular identity.

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