

SEVEN PATHS TO WISDOM - LOGIC OF ARTISTIC MIND

In a recent brilliant exposition of Blake's Poetry entitled Fearful Symmetry. Prof. Northrop Fyre expounds the epistemological basis of real art. Blake opposed the empiricistic approach Locke. In the first chapter entitled Case against Locke, Prof. Fyre shows that

“To Blake the spiritual world was a continuous source of energy; he harnessed spiritual power as an engineer harness water power and used it to drive his inspiration; he was a spiritual utilitarian. He had the complete pragmatism of the artist who as artist, believes nothing but is looking only for what he can use” (p.8).

For Blake defined poetry in the following manner

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“Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers while it is altogether hidden from the corporeal understanding” is My definition of the most sublime Poetry; it is also somewhat in the same manner defined by Plato” (p.9) “Corporeal understanding means bodily

knowledge, the date of perception and the ideas derived from them. But ‘corporeal understanding cannot do more than elucidate the genuine obscurities’ whereas intellectual powers proceed on the assumption that every poem is an imaginative whole.

Thus there is nothing mysterious about the intellectual powers; it proceeds with the essential unity of meaning and form. This idea finds an echo in Kalidasa’s opening verse in the Raghuvamsa that vak and artha form an inseparable unity. They indeed are the same thing. This is what is suggested to be meant by Dante by his term ‘analogy’ or the fourth level of interpretation; it is the final impact of the work of art itself, which includes not only the superficial meaning but all the subordinate meanings which can be deduced from it” (p.10) Thus the allegory that is addressed to the intellectual powers is not a distortion of poetry any more than poetry is a distortion of prose. It is a literary language with its own idioms and its own syntactical arrangement of ideas.”

“Symbolism that governs poetry of the highest order then is in a sense dictated by the vision by the intellectual powers and is not made for communication of ideas or for mere social effect. The ‘sources of art are enthusiasm and inspiration; if society mocks and derives these, it is society that is mad, not the artist no matter

what excesses the latter may commit.” (p.13)

Blake was not merely a word-coiner or poet in the usual sense. He was an engraver of the deliverances of the intellectual powers. He perfected the technique of the engraving art. He was as he himself said always living in the presence of God.

Blake seems to have accepted mentalistic view of Berkeley which he seems to have also held to be incorporeal or ideas. He also vigorously opposed the theory of general ideas. In his own very characteristic manner he writes “To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To particularize is the alone distinction of merit. General knowledges are those knowledges that idiots possess”. Blake abhorred the manner of arriving at the general ideas even as Berkeley had done, for it attenuates the perceived and abstracts the concrete presentation in which the Reality is expressed.

Berkeley held that all reality is mental or ideas. Blake goes beyond the sense ideas of Berkeley to the world of Imagination. It is in this Imagination that God and man are unified.

“Man is all Imagination. God is Man & exists in us and we in Him. The eternal Body of man is the Imagination, that is, God Himself. It manifests itself in his works of Art (In Eternity all Vision” (quoted on p.30)

‘Man’, says Fyre, ‘in his creative acts and perceptions is God, and God is Man, God is the eternal Self, and the worship of God is self-development. This disentangles the idea of ... the two worlds of perception. This world is one of perceiver and perceived, of subject and object; the world of imagination is one of creators and creatures. In his creative activity the artist expresses the creative activity of God; and as all men are contained in Man of God, so all creators are contained in the Creator ... This doctrine of God further explains how a visionary can be said to be normal rather than abnormal, even though his appearance may be rare. The sane man is normal not because he is just like everyone else but because he is superior to the lunatic; the healthy man is normal because he is superior to the cripple. That is, they are most truly themselves. The visionary is supreme normally because most of his contemporaries are private just as cripples and lunatics are The visionary

expresses something latent in all men, and just as it is only in themselves that the latter find God, so it is only in the visionary that they can see him found. As imagination is life, no one is born without any imagination except the stillborn.’ (p.31).

Blake further proceeds to show that though man and God are identical yet it is qualified identity because there is man the tendency to deny God by self-restriction. God is the perfection of man and therefore there is the essence of God in man but man is not wholly God. The infinite variety of man shews this quality of Unity of God. But “ideas such as mankind”, and ‘humanity’ are only generalized”. Blake points out that generalized ideas can produce nothing, whereas the fact that an acorn produces the oak indicates the fact of species or class as different from the ‘generalized tree’. Form and generalized idea are not identical. Form includes the unity of species not a generalization. God is not only the genius but the genus of man, the ‘essence’ from which proceed individuals or ‘identities’ “Essence is not identity, from Essence proceeds Identity and from one essence may proceed many Identities If the Essence was the same as the Identity, there could be but one identity which is false.” (p.21)

More pointedly Blake attacks pantheism. But the theory of knowledge is clearly expressed in the following.

“Just as the perceived object derives its reality from being not only perceived but related to a unified imagination, so the perceiver must derive his from being related to the universal perception of God. If God is the only Creator, he is the only perceiver as well. In every creative act or perception, then, the act or perception is universal and the perceived object particular.” (p.31). and when the perception is ego-centric, the perceived object is general! There are thus two modes of existence. The ego plays with shadows like men in Plato’s cave; to perceive the particular and imagine the real is to perceive and imagine as part of a Divine Body. A hand or eye is individual because it is an organ of a body; separated from the body it loses all individuality beyond what is dead and useless. That is why the imagination is constructive and communicable, and why the ‘memory’ is circular and sterile. Thus we have the distinction between the two orders of existence. The universal perception of the particular which is the divine image; and the ego-centric perception of the general which is the human abstract of it.” (p.32)

Rightly he proceeds from this point to the view that “Man can have no idea of anything greater than Man, as a cup cannot contain more than its capaciousness. But God is Man not because he is so perceived by man, but because he is the creator of man.” Thus those thinkers who are brought up on abstract ideas will begin to deny the postulates of Blake.

Analogy in Aristotle and others meant proportion. What is proportion means nothing except in relation of a concrete thing. The proportions of a real thing are part of its living form. We can only detach the idea or proportion from reality through what Blake calls the ‘mathematical form’; the generalized symmetry without reference perceived objects. ‘Mathematical ideas or forms always have had peculiar importance for abstract reasoners, who try to comprehend God’s creative power through the abstract idea of creation or ‘design’. Thus pattern making extends over Philosophy from Pythagoras to the Renaissance as a kind of intermediary stage between magic and science.” (p.33). Blake did not believe that design is preestablished or given but is creatively imagined by man. Analogy is of the concrete proportions and has no abstract equivalence.

In Art man conquers time. “Those who like Locke, attempt to separate existence from perception are also separating time from space, as we exist in time and perceive in space. Those who like the artists accept the mental nature of reality know that we perceive a thing and a define movement, and that there is thus a quality of time inherent in all perception; and on the other hand that existence is in a body which has a spatial extension. Blake has expressed it; “Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.” Energy and form, existence and perception are the same thing. Every act of the imagination every such union of existence and perception is a time-space complex, not time plus space but time times space, in which time and space as we know than disappears hydrogen and oxygen disappear when they became water.” (46p).

“Eternity is not endless time, nor infinity endless space; they are entirely different mental categories through which we perceive the unfallen world. A spiritual world which is visualized as a world of unchanging order, symbolized by the invariable interrelations of mathematics, is not an eternal world but a spatial one, from which time has simply been eliminated. And to complete the antithesis, a spiritual world visualized as one of unchanging duration is a

world of abstract time from which the bounding outline or spatial limits of existence have been eliminated. The Lockean can conceive of eternity and infinity only in either or both of these ways; that is why he uses two words, one suggesting time and other space, for the same thing. But his two categories have nothing to do with real infinity and eternity; nor in fact, has he two of them; all he has in each case is the indefinite, which is the opposite of the infinite or eternal, and one of the most sinister words in Blake's symbolism. Clock time is a mental nightmare all other abstract ideas. An impalpable present vanishing between an irrevocable past and an unknown future; it is the source of all our ideas of fate and causality. It suggests an inexorable march of inevitably succeeding events in which everything is a necessary consequence of causes stretching back to an unknown God as a First Cause and stretching on into a future which would be completely predictable if it were not too complicated. Its only possible symbol but only Blake but even for those who believe in it is the chain, which is the symbol of slavery. At best time is the mercy of Eternity; its swiftness makes more tolerable the condition of our fallen state ... To the imaginative eye there is more definite shape to time. Blake says "Many suppose that before the Creation All was solitude & chaos. This is the most pernicious idea that can enter the mind.... Eternity exists and all things in Eternity,

independent of creation which was an act of Mercy” Man exists eternally by virtue of and to the extent of his perception of eternity. Any doctrine of personal immortality which conceives of it either as the survival of the individual or of the disappearance of the individual into some objective form of generalized being, such as matter or force or the collective memory of posterity is again thinking of the eternal as the indefinite.” (p.47). “The space principles apply to space Real space is the eternal here; where we are is always the center of the universe, and the circumference of our affairs is the circumference of the universe, just as real time is the eternal now of our personal experience.” (p.48).

“According to Locke ideas come from spaced into the mind according to Blake space is a state of mind Space is the form of what we create.” The three levels of imagination are;

(i) of the isolated individual reflecting on his memories of perceptions and evolving generalizations and abstract ideas. This world is single, for the distinction of subject and object is lost and we have only a brooding subject left. (It is hell and Blake’s symbols

are of sterility, rocks and sand).

(ii) Above this is the ordinary world we live in, a double world of subject and object, of organism and environment, which Blake calls Generation. No living thing is completely adjusted to this world except the plants, hence Blake calls of this as vegetable.

(iii) Above this is the imaginative world and Blake divides this into an upper and a lower part, so that the three worlds expand into four. Love and wonder are stages in an imaginative expansion, they establish a permanent unity of subject and object, and they lift us from a world of lover and beloved.. But this is lower world or lower paradise. Ultimately our attitude to what we see is one of mental conquest springing from active energy Love and wonder are relaxations from this state. They do not produce the visions of art but an imaginative receptivity.... The highest possible state therefore it is not the union of lover and beloved, but of creator and the creature, of energy and form. This latter state for which Blake reserves the name Eden. (p.49).

‘Thus there is no question of finding God either through the understanding or the will.’ (p.50) For in the

indefinite view of the world as it is illustrated in Locke, man is a subject contemplating an object, an individual unit of perception trying to break down a world outside him into a corresponding aggregate of undividable units which are called atoms when they are too small to be seen and stars when they are too large to be mentally organized. This is called understanding". (p.384) **Man's conceptions of both subject and object are oppressed by a mystery. He knows vaguely that there is something behind him, that he is not wholly self-contained unit or perception, and that as an individual he is part of something more than an aggregate; but what the form of this he does not know.** He knows too that there is something behind what he sees, which Locke calls a substratum of substance, for an attempt to define mystery can only be a pleonasm. When the Lockean view of Reality becomes complete, it becomes exhausted; when man's mind becomes wholly a function of Nature, nature becomes a mental category. The attempt to see subject and object in terms of units thus becomes an attempt to see them in terms of unity. But at this point the whole One vision turns inside out. In terms of unity, individuals, atoms and stars are no longer simply undividable units; they are all equally corpuscles, little bodies within a larger body. And as this larger body must be common to both subject and object, the mystery

of what is behind the subject and the mystery of what is behind the object reveal one another, and become the same things, the universal form of both, and the body of God who perceives through man. This is the theory of knowledge in which the word theory has recovered its original sense of seeing and is no longer a matter of fumbling in the dark for a substratum or for unknown powers of the soul” (p.385).