

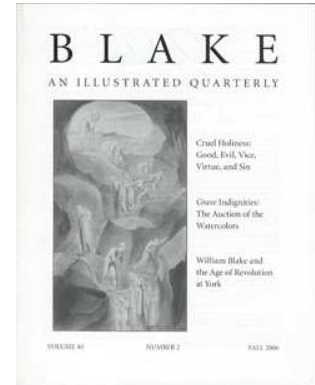
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A R T I C L E

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BY HARRY WHITE

Even some of Blake's leading interpreters have failed to come to terms with the radical nature of his assault on the moral virtues. Frye writes that for Blake there "can be no such thing, strictly speaking, as an evil act; all acts are good ...";¹ according to Nurmi, "Good and evil, as the religious understand them, do not exist, says Blake."² Both statements suggest that Blake had his own understanding of good or of good and evil, when in truth he believed there really is no such thing as an evil or a good act as anyone understands it. That is why he deliberately identified all acts as virtuous, not good, as Frye would have it.

Blake was an antinomian Christian who refrained from advancing a moral position of his own and who confronted any and all beliefs in the moral law from a skeptical, nominalist standpoint consistent with the theory of knowledge he applied to all rational systems. What his writings advance is not a normative but a descriptive ethic, detailing the nature of our ideas of good and evil, how they arise, the harmful effects they have on individuals, and why they inevitably lead to conflict.

None of this means that Blake did not concern himself with whether men lead virtuous lives, only, as we shall see, that he understood vice and virtue to be completely different from good and evil.

Good and Evil

We might start by taking Blake at his word when he wrote quite straightforwardly and without qualification, "Moral Virtues do not Exist they are Allegories & dissimulations" (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 563).³ All "Error," Blake believed, "is Created Truth is Eternal"; for him "Evil is Created," and so is the traditional belief in sin: "He [Satan] created Seven deadly

Sins drawing out his infernal scroll, / Of Moral laws" (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 565; *Jerusalem* 49:70, E 199; *Milton* 9:21-22, E 103). These errors and dissimulations are created whenever men mistake or misrepresent the allegories which seem to be real to their creators for what truly is real. They arise in Ulro where "What seems to Be: Is: To those to whom / It seems to Be, & is productive of the most dreadful / Consequences to those to whom it seems to Be" (*Jerusalem* 32:51-53, E 179).

Blake thus attacked the moral virtues from a nominalist standpoint, showing that one of the most dreadful consequences of the sleep of Ulro is the belief that the abstract terms *good* and *evil* denote actual characteristics within persons—a belief no different in kind from the equally erroneous opinion that *material substance* refers to a thing that actually exists in nature or that *Nobodaddy* identifies a being abiding in the distant sky. "Goodness or Badness," Blake noted, "has nothing to do with Character" (*On Homers Poetry*, E 269).

Like all other abstractions, good and evil are created by "the Reasoning Power," in this case by taking "the Two [real, existing] Contraries which are call'd Qualities ... / ... [and naming] them Good & Evil / From them ... [making] an Abstract, which is a Negation" (*Jerusalem* 10:8-10, E 152-53). Here and elsewhere, Blake used the term *negation*, meaning an "unreal thing, a nonentity" (see *negation* in the *OED*), to identify any abstraction which the reasoning faculty creates and which men then mistake for an existing entity or quality. "Negations [like good and evil] Exist Not," although rationalists often presume that they do because their reasoning power has produced a "false appearance which appears to the reasoner" (*Jerusalem* 17:34, E 162; *Milton* 29:15, E 127).

Although Blake defined good and evil as negations that "Exist Not" and insisted that "Negations are not Contraries" (*Jerusalem* 17:34, 17:33, E 162), and although Nurmi has warned that "the contraries, though opposed to each other, are not negations,"⁴ negations and contraries are quite closely related, as the passage from *Jerusalem* (10:8-10, above) reveals, and that is perhaps one reason why readers tend to assign a false reality to good and evil—they mistake these negations for contraries. For example, Bandy reads the passage from *Jerusalem* to mean that if what she calls "the two *contraries* of Good and Evil are not separated ... they function in harmony ..." (my italics).⁵ Stewart cites the statement in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence," and concludes that, for Blake, the "contraries of Love/Hate, Reason/Energy and Good/Evil are 'necessary to Human Existence.'" ⁶ Blake, however, did not list good and evil among the contraries. It is the next sentence which reads "From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil" (*Marriage* 3, E 34).

The current essay follows up on Blake's ideas regarding skepticism, rationalism, and empiricism covered in Harry White, "Blake's Resolution to the War Between Science and Philosophy," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 39.3 (winter 2005-06): 108-25. Of necessity some points are repeated. It also seeks to give a written body to the things I learned in discussions with Brian Wilkie, who was my friend and mentor for many decades.

1. Frye 55.

2. Nurmi, *Blake's Marriage* 22.

3. All quotations from Blake are taken from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), hereafter "E".

4. Nurmi, *William Blake* 75.

5. Bandy 53.

6. Stewart 45.

Even Nurmi, who points out quite rightly that "Good and Evil are merely abstractions," then immediately goes on to suggest something rather different when he writes that in *The Marriage*, he [Blake] explains 'what the religious call Good & Evil' really are."⁷ I shall return to this passage later, and I am perhaps quibbling to make a point we need to keep in mind, which is that good and evil in Blake really are nothing. When we read Blake's writings on good and evil, we need to understand that if he is not identifying good and evil as abstract non-entities, as fictitious creations of the reasoning faculty, then what we are reading is his analysis of what others ordinarily (mis)take good and evil to be and not what he thought good and evil really are or truly ought to be. The sections from *Jerusalem* and *Marriage* describe how and why this mistake so often occurs. They describe the origin and genesis of our ideas of good and evil, showing how the negations of good and evil, though not contraries, nevertheless do spring from them: the reasoning power "makes" or "creates" these abstract non-entities whenever men "call" or "name" the existing contraries they do experience "good" or "evil."

"Self Evident Truth," for Blake, "is one Thing and Truth the result of Reasoning is another Thing" (annotations to Bacon, E 621). He set "Downright Plain Truth" against "Reasoning [which] is Nothing" and insisted that any man could "Know Truth at Sight" (annotations to Watson, *An Apology for the Bible*, E 618; annotations to Reynolds, E 659). He sought throughout his writings to expose the error, common to rational systems of various kinds, of reifying the abstractions the reasoning power creates and readily or deliberately committing what linguistic philosophers now call a "category mistake": mistaking one category, abstract non-entities which seem real to the rationalist ("Truth the result of Reasoning"), for another category, entities that actually are real ("Self Evident Truth"). When considering the moral virtues, Blake repeatedly categorized them as products of "the Reasoning Power": "Rational Truth," he contended, "[is the] Root of Evil & Good" (*Jerusalem* 10:7-16, E 152-53; *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*, E 268), and he insisted that good and evil which rationalists create should not be mistaken for plain truths that every man can know at sight.

The distinction Blake made between the rational moral arguments that a few philosophers create and which are open to doubt and what is evident to everyone is as old as antiquity. As Diogenes Laertius wrote regarding Pyrrhonian skepticism: "concerning the things the dogmatists assert definitely with argument, ... we suspend judgement because of their being non-evident." Specifically, "there is nothing which is good or bad for everyone ...; therefore, there is nothing good or bad by nature."⁸ With the rise of empirical science, the differences between rational truth and plain truth were even more sharply defined, and Blake's distinction between rational truth and

truth evident at sight could have come right out of Hume, who clearly distinguished the "relation of ideas" from "matters of fact."⁹

Blake's regular use of terms like *error*, *dissimulation*, *false appearance*, or *delusion* to describe our ideas of good and evil should help us better understand his approach, which was not to inform his readers of what he thought to be right and wrong, but true and false. Blake's writings aim to expose the fallacy of moral realism. For him, the belief that men could have experience and knowledge of good and evil as existing entities or characteristics, that such things were or ought to be self-evidently true to any reasonably sensible individual, amounted to a cognitive mistake, and Blake attacked that mistake at its foundations, representing both the theophany on Sinai and the fall in Eden in such a way as to reveal how there is fundamentally nothing logical, reasonable, or just about the way we arrive at our ideas of right and wrong.

In *The First Book of Urizen*, he showed that the book of laws Urizen unfolds does not descend from on high, but arises instead out of "the depths of dark solitude" and contains what Urizen acknowledges to be the "secrets of dark contemplation / By fightings and conflicts dire, / With terrible monsters" (4:6, E 71; 4:26-28, E 72). Blake thus represented the Mosaic law as a symptom of mental disorder posing as revelation, and he portrayed humankind first coming to judge in terms of good and evil in very much the same way. The so-called Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is shown to be not a source for knowledge of any kind, but a "dismal shade / Of Mystery" that is rooted entirely in feelings of ill will and which bears only the "fruit of Deceit"—"the fruit / Of Urizens Mysterious tree" (see "The Human Abstract," E 27; *Four Zoas* 87:13-14, E 369; "A Poison Tree," E 28). Indeed, "A Poison Tree" offers one of the neatest refutations of Milton's attempt to justify the ways of God to man, placing the blame for the death and woe humankind suffers from on a wrathful God who seeks to tempt us with what we desire so that he can punish us for acting on our desires.

The righteous have the arrogance to claim that they and they alone have discovered or had revealed to them what is true for all humankind: "Here alone I ... / Have written the secrets of wisdom," Urizen proclaims, "Laws of peace, of love, of unity: / ... / One King, one God, one Law" (*Urizen* 4:24-40, E 72). In response to these claims of moral reason, wisdom, and revelation, Blake advanced an emotive theory of morality to show that emotional turmoil and hateful feelings have been and remain the true and ultimate source for our ideas of good and evil. The moral virtues are nothing more than rationalizations of personal feelings which give to those feelings an objectivity and universality they do not have and a legitimacy they do not deserve. According to Blake, our ideas of good and evil did not originate, as traditionally taught, with fallen desires. They do arise from desires and emotions, such as wrath

7. Nurmi, *William Blake* 70.

8. Inwood and Gerson 181.

9. Hume, *Enquiry* 598.

or hate, but come about only through a rationalization—a misunderstanding and misrepresentation—of those desires, for as we have seen, it is not desire of any kind, but “Rational Truth [which is the] Root of Evil & Good” (*For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* 16, E 268). “Reasoning upon its own Dark Fiction” (*Everlasting Gospel*, E 520), the reasoning power creates in us monstrous misconceptions regarding our feelings and desires that are not original to or inherent in our humanity. It is after all “Desire ... & all other Affections [that] are Natural, but Understanding is Acquired” and “Thought alone can make monsters, but the affections cannot” (annotations to Swedenborg, E 602, 603). Accordingly, Oothoon tries to convince Theotormon to rid himself of the monstrous thoughts he has acquired by recalling the natural affection he felt for her: “Religious dreams and holy vespers, light thy smoky fires,” she says, “Once were thy fires lighted by the eyes of honest morn” (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion* 6:14-15, E 49).

The terms Blake employed to discredit any and all moral systems are not *evil* or *wrong*, but, as we have seen, *error* or *delusion*, and now, *mystery* and *deceit*. Accordingly, he assigned to Urizen the dual role of architect of the physical world and primeval priest (*Urizen* chaps. 1-2, E 70-72) because he understood the error of mistaking rational abstractions for concrete realities to be the underlying common cause for Urizen’s creation of both “globes of attraction” and the moral law “in books formd of metals” (*Urizen* chap. 2, E 71-72). It was not Blake’s intention to heap everything he hated onto Urizen, like some mad romantic attacking everything reasonable, nor to lump indiscriminately together everyone whose ideas he disliked. His purpose was to show that, first and foremost, the problem of good and evil is not a matter for moral consideration, but for intellectual analysis. The struggle for him is not that of good versus evil, which has been the cause of so many martyrdoms and wars, but involves mental fight regarding truth and error: “The Combats of Truth & Error is Eating of the Tree of Life” (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 563), and unlike the cruel combatants of good and evil, “the Soldier who fights for Truth, calls his enemy his brother” (*Jerusalem* 38:41, E 185). Thus Blake criticized men as diverse as Moses, Plato, and Locke, not for the reason that he understood them or anyone else to be morally wrong, but rather because he found them all, like Urizen, to be the dupes and perpetrators of abstract delusions: “Moses beheld upon Mount Sinai forms of dark delusion”—the “abstract Law” given also to “Trismegistus ... / ... Pythagoras Socrates & Plato” (*Song of Los* 3:17-19, E 67). Similarly, Blake identified Satan, in his role as moral lawgiver, as “Newtons Pantocrator weaving the Woof of Locke” (*Milton* 4:11, E 98) because the “Fiend of Righteousness” works by the same inductive method that misleads scientists into mistaking their generalizations and resultant abstract laws for real things: “You accumulate Particulars, & murder by analyzing, that you / May take the aggregate; & you call the aggregate Moral Law” (*Jerusalem* 91:26-27, E 251).

Blake understood the mathematical principles of natural philosophy along with the principles of the moral law that a

Newton or a Moses created to be fundamentally the same—systematic creations of the reasoning faculty that have no valid correspondence to the things we do experience and know. As “There is no Such *Thing* as a ... Natural Cause” (annotations to Bacon, E 626; my italics), there is also no such thing as the moral law, nor do any of the non-entities that compose it denote any things we experience. So while Paul believed that “nothing good dwells within me” (Rom. 7.18), Blake contended that neither good nor evil dwells anywhere in man:

Aristotle says Characters are either Good or Bad: now Goodness or Badness has nothing to do with Character. an Apple tree a Pear tree a Horse a Lion, are Characters but a Good Apple tree or a Bad, is an Apple tree still: a Horse is not more a Lion for being a Bad Horse. that is its Character; its Goodness or Badness is another consideration. (*On Homers Poetry*, E 269)

Aristotle gave to morality what it does not have, an actual location within men, and made it a defining characteristic of our personalities. Urizen makes the same mistake when he says that the “Seven deadly Sins” are actually that “Which the bosoms of all inhabit,” as does Vala when she claims to “have looked into the secret Soul ... / And in the dark recesses found Sin” (*Urizen* 4:29-30, E 72; *Jerusalem* 22:14-15, E 167).

Whatever Blake came to understand sin to be, he always insisted that it is not some quality or characteristic that inhabits and therefore can be observed within the bodies or souls of men. Sin is not original to our humanity, as Christian orthodoxy has been claiming since ancient times: “Remove away that blackning church / Remove away that marriage hearse / Remove away that _____ of blood / Youll quite remove the ancient curse” (“An Ancient Proverb,” E 475). Just as he noted that Aristotle located goodness and badness within characters and thereby mistakenly made them identifying characteristics of individuals, so when Blake took up the issue of sin, he was equally intent on showing that it is a mistake to believe that sin inhabits and therefore characterizes individuals or humanity in general. Individuals by their actions inhabit—exist within—a state of sin, and not the other way around. To say that a man is a sinner or is good may seem to be the same as saying that he is wise or is tall, but they don’t mean the same thing. Such statements fail to “Distinguish ... States from Individuals in those States” and in “cruel holiness” impute iniquity to individuals rather than states (*Milton* 32:22, E 132; *Jerusalem* 49:64-71, E 199). Compare the statements “*The First Book of Urizen* is an epic poem” and “*The First Book of Urizen* is a treasonous and blasphemous poem.” The first describes an immutable characteristic of the poem itself, the second its temporary status relative to certain church and state laws at particular times and places, but nothing about any characteristic of the poem itself.

From first to last Blake aimed to relocate our notions of good, evil, and sin. He redefined good and evil as abstract non-entities and placed them in Ulro, a void “Outside of Existence” (*Milton* 41:37, E 143), and although he understood

sin, unlike good and evil, really to exist, he believed that it too had been similarly misplaced. To remove the idea of sin from the bosoms and souls of men, Blake came up with the idea of a state so that he could place sin, as he had good and evil, outside the souls of men. Sin does not (permanently) inhabit the bosoms of men; men "reside" in a state of sin, and a man "passes thro them [states like sin] like a traveller" (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 558, 556).

Blake's conclusion regarding Aristotle is the same one Hume came to when he noted that "Vice and virtue ... are not qualities in objects ...": "Take any action allow'd to be vicious Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*." But if vice and virtue do not exist as matters of fact, Hume felt they do exist in "your own breast ... [as] a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards [an] action."¹⁰ Blake believed, however, that nothing like vice or disapprobation has any existence within the human breast—that is not where they originate. Vice and virtue, as traditionally defined, are not sentiments arising from some inborn tendency as the moral sense philosophers contended (to the contrary, morality, as we shall see, contradicts every man's true self). They are not original to our emotional or imaginative life; they have no existence in eternity or experience. Feelings like love and hate are of course natural to man, but there is no inherent moral sense that inevitably leads men to feel that other men are virtuous or vicious, nor are men born with any feelings that by themselves would cause them to believe that what they desire is either good or evil.

So far, we have seen how Blake analyzed ideas of good and evil from the standpoints of epistemology and ontology, showing how we experience contraries (such as love and hate) and know them to exist, and how negations (such as good and evil) are non-entities that do not exist. In addition, as Nurmi has noted, "Negations like Good and Evil attempt to hinder and even destroy,"¹¹ and Blake's most devastating analysis was to show why they work that way—to show what it is about rational truths that inevitably and unavoidably leads men to promote tyranny, destruction, and warfare.

One of the fundamental rules governing rational truths is the law of non-contradiction, which holds that if you conjoin a proposition and its negation the result is a contradiction and the statement is necessarily false. Accordingly, Blake showed how the moral virtues, rooted as they are in rational truth, operate in experience by negating one or the other of a pair of opposing contraries in the way that the reasoning power functions in abstract logical systems to eliminate contradictions.

Hume demonstrated how the "contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness"¹² Blake similarly noted that "Contraries

mutually Exist" and that "Contraries [are] equally true" (*Jerusalem* 17:33, E 162; 24:3, E 169). For him, the term *contrary* identifies the non-logical, contingent, and unsystematic way in which the minute particulars we experience relate to each other: a contrary is an existing quality or characteristic opposed to some other existing quality or characteristic, but not logically negating or falsifying it because no contrary can possibly contradict any other. No opposition or difference, no taste, opinion, or belief can possibly falsify or necessarily condemn any other as untrue or wrong. The wildness of the ass does not negate the meekness of the camel. There is no single abode of holiness, as Urizen proclaims, "for every thing that lives is holy," and there is nothing illogical in stating that God made both the wrathful tyger and its contrary, the gentle lamb, for "Nothing [which does exist] is displeasing to God" (see *Urizen* 4:7ff., E 71; *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* 8:10, E 51; "The Tyger," E 24-25; *Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 564). The pride of the peacock, the lust of the goat, the wrath of the lion, the nakedness of woman—these and other desires and feelings which the Accuser lists among the seven deadly sins all come from God (*Marriage* 8:22-25, E 36).

The relationships among contraries are non-contentious because "where [as in Beulah] Contrarieties are equally True" is also "Where no dispute can come" (*Milton* 30:1-3, E 129). Among all the contraries we experience, "Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth" (*Marriage* 8:38, E 37), since whatever any man imagines cannot possibly be contradicted by another man's images or beliefs. A "firm perswasion that a thing is so, make[s] it so" (*Marriage* 12, E 38); nothing else is required. Such thinking comes right out of the Protestant notion of the inviolability of the individual conscience, as well as the call for toleration within the state for divergent beliefs. For Blake, no individual or group of individuals has any right to declare that what others are firmly persuaded of is not true. So long as individuals are firmly and genuinely persuaded, there is for Blake no distinction between orthodox and heretical beliefs, between the supposedly one true and all other false religions. Insofar as the "Religions of all Nations" derive from "the Poetic Genius" and "the Spirit of Prophecy," they are one (*All Religions are One*, E 1)—one, that is, until "a system [is] formed" and priesthood begins by "Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales" (*Marriage* 11, E 38). Then domination, martyrdoms, and wars rule the world whenever systematic theology, moral reasoning, and sacred codes replace poetry and prophecy as the basis of religion.

Disputes can never occur among contraries, but when contraries are redefined in moral terms, when, for example, gentleness and meekness are said to be good, it follows necessarily—it is a simple matter of logic—that their contraries wrath and wildness must be thought of as evil. Explicit moral praise of anything implies a condemnation of its contrary. As soon as you define some joy or desire or belief as good, you negate and therefore condemn its contrary as evil, for unlike contraries, the negations that men derive from them cannot possibly function in harmony and are always at war: in Ulro

10. Hume, *Treatise* 177.

11. Nurmi, *William Blake* 75.

12. Hume, *Enquiry* 598.

"the Contraries of Beulah [which in Beulah are equally true] War beneath Negations Banner," and the result is that "Brotherhood is changed into a Curse & a Flattery / By Differences between Ideas, that Ideas themselves ... / ... may be slain" (*Milton* 34:23, E 134; 35:4-6, E 135).

The logic of all moral judgment is such that it makes no difference whether you name something good or you call it evil. That is why I question the use of the term good to describe what Blake found acceptable, for he understood moral praise to be no less vicious than moral blame. He therefore objected even to those systems that demand what he recognized to be good things, because in every case the "Moral Virtues are continual Accusers of Sin & promote Eternal Wars & Domineering over others" (annotations to Berkeley, E 664). If, for example, you say that energy is bad, you necessarily pit it against reason as its negation. If you say that energy is good, you do the same thing by pitting it against reason as its negation. It's the same difference in either case. Goodness and moral virtue are for Blake "Cruel Goodnesses" and "cruel Virtue" (*Milton* 13:34, E 107; 22:44, E 117) because he found them to be negations no less than evil and vice, for the reason that they function in exactly the same way: they negate existing contraries which we would otherwise ordinarily accept as equally true.

It is thus not the content of any moral system that Blake objected to. Obviously he had no disagreement with "the laws of Kings & Priests" when, for example, he listed "Murder," "Theft," and "Backbiting" as vicious. His concern had to do with the way in which all moral systems operate. While he agreed that murder and theft are indeed vicious, he described them as vicious simply because they involve the "restraint on action" and "Hindering Another" (annotations to Lavater, E 601; my italics). Blake was certainly not seeking to identify points of agreement. Rather, he was considering how the whole concept of vice and virtue has been misapplied. He wanted the term vice to be applied no longer to the "propensity," the "feature of the man," or "the Staminial Virtues of Humanity." To do so is to apply moral judgment to individual characteristics rather than to behavior which hinders or restrains action in oneself or others. No one's virtues or features can be said in and of themselves to hinder another's. They do not define how a person chooses to interact with others. Blake wanted the terms vice and virtue to be used as descriptions of how we act, fail to act, or hinder others from acting (more on this in the following section).

To contend, as Stewart does, that for Blake "evil is important and necessary" and "has to be transformed into good"¹³ flies in the face of every statement Blake made about the desolation that the delusion of good and evil brought down upon human existence—"Eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil" being one of only two things he said was displeasing to God (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 564). What Blake repeatedly said is that we should refrain from all moral denomination and

judgment because nothing good can come from calling, naming, identifying, or labeling anything evil or good. He did not call on men to refrain from doing evil, but to stop attempting to be holy and righteous: "To be Good only is to be / A Devil or else a Pharisee" (*Everlasting Gospel*, E 521). Nor did he envision the transformation of evil into good. If we are to speak with any accuracy, we need to recognize that the crucial change he identified—and spoke out against—involves the righteous transforming contraries, such as love and hate or reason and energy, into the warring negations of good and evil.

Moreover, we need to understand that, for Blake, the righteous do not promulgate "Laws of Moral Virtue" to make men morally fit, but so that their "Humanity shall be no more," and "Human Nature shall no more remain" (*Jerusalem* 4:31-32, E 147; *Four Zoas* 11:23, E 306). "Good & Evil / ... / [are] ... a murderer / Of every Divine Member ..." (*Jerusalem* 10:9-13, E 153). The impoverishment and destruction of our divine humanity is no coincidental by-product of morality. On the assumption that deadly sin inhabits the bosoms of all, it is the very thing morality aims to accomplish—to bring "death / To every energy of man, and forbid the springs of life," to despise and mock "a Mental Gift in another; calling it ... sin," so that "All Mental Powers by Diseases" are bound (*Jerusalem* 31:11-12, E 177; 77, E 232; *Everlasting Gospel*, E 522). Disease, rather than moral fitness, is thus the first and last indication that the moral law has taken effect. The "Wastes of Moral Law" (*Jerusalem* 24:24, E 169) mean that the rose is sick, the youth pines away, Long John Brown dies, pestilence grows from unacted desires, Theotormon is tormented by sick dreams, plagues blight the marriage hearse, and the priest "lays his curse on the fairest joys" just as "the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on," destroying individuals just like caterpillars destroy the leaves and branches of trees (see "The Sick Rose," E 23; "Ah! Sun-flower," E 25; "Long John Brown," E 496; *Marriage* 10:67, E 38; *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* 6:19, E 50; "London," E 26-27; *Marriage* 9:55, E 37). The "disease of Shame covers [Albion] from head to feet" (*Jerusalem* 21:3, E 166) like the running sores that covered Job from head to foot, and a "Tyrant is the Worst disease & the Cause of all others" (annotations to Bacon, E 625). Given his understanding that the moral law targets our humanity, Blake's response was simple: "Thy own humanity learn to adore" (*Everlasting Gospel*, E 520). His first and only commandment to all men was to "obey their Humanities, & not pretend Holiness" (*Jerusalem* 91:5, E 251).

Damon would have us believe that "Eventually Blake came to consider Sin a spiritual disease" and that for him "Disease is another word for Sin."¹⁴ Nathan, I think, is more correct to say that "sin is ... a word Blake uses almost as a synonym for mistake ...," a "mistake which is to be forgiven in short order."¹⁵ The position Blake retained to the end was that mental disease

14. Damon 373, 104.

15. Nathan 132. See also "Error, Sin, and Forgiveness" in Damrosch and "Error and Forgiveness" in Moskal.

13. Stewart 47, 44.

and disorder result not from sin, not as a spiritual descent into some dark night of the soul, but from the cruel condemnations of the righteous and the sinner's acceptance and internalization of the moral law. "It is only because of those who fail to forgive sin that sin gets to be the monster it so often is."¹⁶ If sin itself were the disease, then the cure Blake would have recommended would be to seek to become sinless or holy, and we know how he abhorred all those who make such claims for themselves and demand purity from others. "Holiness," he wrote, "is not The Price of Enterance into Heaven" (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 564; a further examination of sin will follow in the final section).

Antinomian and libertarian that he was, Blake believed there could be no "Liberty without Universal Toleration" (annotations to Boyd, E 635), and he recognized as well that universal toleration remains intolerable to the righteous. Liberty for all humanity can never be realized in a society where the righteous demand that all men must accept their peculiar notions of moral virtue: when the Sons of Albion first create their ideas of good and evil, Los recognizes it as a threat to his freedom and believes that he too "must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans" (*Jerusalem* 10:20, E 153). This statement does not, as Bloom comments, amount to an apologia for Blake's own creation of a complex systematic vision.¹⁷ Essick might be right to identify it as a cultural motto of our time; the problem is that it was never intended to be one of Blake's "ringing declarations."¹⁸ Creation is not a positive thing for Blake. His writings repeatedly distinguish what is created by the few from what is self-evidently and eternally true for every man, and he used the terms or phrases "to create" or "creation" to describe error, the material and corporeal world, the Creator God, and the rational systems created to enslave the vulgar, all of which he sought to expose as dreadfully false. If we read on, we find that Los' creation of his own system occurs while he is in a state of distress, struggling with his own cursing spectre and seeking to dominate it: "Los, in fury & strength: in indignation & burning wrath / Shuddring the Spectre howls. ... / ... / [and] curses ... / Cities & Nations, Families & Peoples, Tongues & Laws," and "Los cries, Obey my voice & never deviate from my will / And I will be merciful to thee ... / ... / If thou refuse, thy present torments will seem southern breezes / To what thou shalt endure if thou obey not my great will" (*Jerusalem* 10:22-36, E 153). His words echo Exodus: "If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God ... and give heed to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put on the Egyptians ..." (15:26). The entire episode shows how when separated from Los, the imaginative poet, the Spectre of Urthona condemns while the poet struggles to control himself as his spectre controls and condemns others. This is not the liberating moment in the chapter. That will

come later. At this point Los' struggles parallel those of Urizen, who earlier struggled with terrible monsters from which he emerged as a priest similarly proclaiming, "Lo! I unfold my darkness ... / ... / Let each chuse ... / ... / One King, one God, one Law" (*Urizen* 4:31-40, E 72).

Blake believed that "all sects of Philosophy are from the Poetic Genius" (*All Religions are One*, E 1), and his chronic concern was that the products of the poetic genius might be misappropriated by poets themselves or taken advantage of by priests to enslave the vulgar (*Marriage* 11, E 38). In plates 12-13 of *Marriage* (E 38-39), Blake had Ezekiel explain how the words of the poet-prophet are taken advantage of, this time as a call to war and domination:

we of Israel taught that the Poetic Genius ... was the first principle and all the others merely derivative, which was the cause of our despising the Priests & Philosophers of other countries, and prophesying that all Gods would at last be proved. to originate in ours & to be the tributaries of the Poetic Genius, it was this. that our great poet King David desired so fervently & invokes so pathetically, saying by this he conquers enemies & governs kingdoms; and we so loved our God. that we cursed in his name all the deities of surrounding nations ...; from these opinions the vulgar came to think that all nations would at last be subject to the jews.

Blake wished to believe that "The Word of God, [is] the only light of antiquity that remains unperverted by War" (*On Virgil*, E 270). However, the poet who dedicated himself to attacking "The Perversions of Christs words & acts ... & also the perversions of the Bible" (as he described Paine's work in his annotations to Watson, *An Apology for the Bible*, E 611) understood that all too readily and too often the labors of poet-prophets result in the creation of systems that the poet or others exploit to pervert mental into corporeal warfare so as to triumph over and enslave men. Blake showed by Los' actions what can happen when the "Spectre ... the Reasoning Power in Man" separates "From Imagination," and "thence frames Laws & Moralities" (*Jerusalem* 74:10-12, E 229). Then the poet forgets that "Morality" belongs "to Philosophy & not to Poetry" (*On Homers Poetry*, E 270), and he writes as if he were a priest.

By creating his own system, Los gives a body to falsehood and confronts his own damning spectre. He is therefore able to identify his error and return to his true poetic vocation, which is not to create systems that liberate some while enslaving all others, but in the end to liberate everyone by "Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems" (*Jerusalem* 11:5, E 154). If we are looking for a ringing declaration of Blake's motto, that would be it. Blake's mission was to deliver individuals from the errors of systematic reasoning and the tyrannical moral and religious systems it creates.

Blake knew quite well that many works of art serve the religious dogmas of their day, so he insisted over and again throughout his writings that the poet writes as a prophet who announces and proclaims (which is what prophecy means),

16. Nathan 133.

17. Bloom, "Commentary" 931.

18. Essick 251.

but who does not command belief or obedience to the poet's voice. The true poet-prophet is distinguished by the fact that he does not command or curse as Urizen and the Spectre of Urthona do. As forcefully and fervently as he wrote, as systematic as his later prophecies became, Blake never thought, like Milton, that his mission was to justify the ways of God to man, for he never proclaimed of the systems he created that "the Gods had orderd such things" (see *Marriage* 11, E 38), although he realized and dramatized how poet-prophets could be tempted to make such claims.

The erroneous belief which every man's reasoning spectre is prone to, that there could be true, authoritative answers to questions like what are good and evil, right and wrong, serves only to enthrone authority figures who through their "metaphysics" come to "speak of themselves as the only wise" and to dismiss "all other men [as] fools, sinners, & nothings" (*Marriage* 19, 21, 23, E 42-43). That is what men who create the moral law seek, to raise themselves above all others so that a few may control and dominate the many.

What the priest and king refuse to recognize is that "Every Mans Wisdom is peculiar to his own Individ[u]ality" (*Milton* 4:8, E 98), and if perchance someone creates his own system so as not to be enslaved by another man's, he must understand that no system contains truths that must be evident to all good and reasonable men simply because they appear reasonable to the system's creator. A rational truth should never be mistaken for a self-evident truth. When, for instance, an Angel's "phantasy" of hell appears evident to him, he needs to realize—as he eventually does—that it is a false and delusory appearance resulting from his "metaphysics," "Analytics," and "systematic reasoning," and not anything he really sees (*Marriage* 19-21, E 42-43). As there is no place called hell evident to anyone, as there is no Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil growing anywhere but in the human brain, so there is also nothing self-evidently true for any man about the various concepts of good and evil some men create and seek to impose on everyone else. Anyone who claims that such things as good and evil, right and wrong, have been discovered by or were revealed to him, even if he has disappeared onto a mountaintop for forty days and nights, must be understood to be making an obviously false claim.

The truly good news, however, is that whereas "The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself / ... / ... the Reason is a State / Created to be Annihilated ... / Whatever can be Created can be Annihilated" (*Milton* 32:32-36, E 132). Insofar as "Error is Created ... It is Burnt up the Moment Men cease to behold it" (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 565), so the error of moral virtue that men have created can be annihilated so that one day "Good & Evil are no more" (*Everlasting Gospel*, E 521). Then men and women may return to that paradise of innocent desire and affection that was lost once we ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Vice and Virtue

Blake defined freedom as "the liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination" (*Jerusalem* 77, E 231). The political implications of his position might be made more clear by comparing that statement with one by a contemporary, Thomas Jefferson: "The error seems not sufficiently eradicated that the operations of the mind, as well as acts of the body, are subject to the coercion of the laws"¹⁹ To act freely without being restrained or hindered or compelled in one's actions by any laws is also what it meant for Blake to be virtuous. Blake had a clear conception of vice and virtue, but he understood vice and virtue to be something altogether different from good and evil. In an annotation that Bloom calls "the most profound, and the most central for a reader's understanding of Blake himself,"²⁰ Blake noted that Lavater

makes every thing originate in its accident. he makes the vicious propensity <not only> a leading feature of the man But as I understand Vice it is a Negative—It does not signify what the laws of Kings & Priests have call'd Vice we who are philosophers ought not to call the Staminal Virtues of Humanity by the same name that we call the omissions of intellect springing from poverty

Every mans <leading> propensity ought to be call'd his leading Virtue ... But the Philosophy of Causes & Consequences misled Lavater as it has all his cotemporaries. Each thing is its own cause & its own effect Accident is the omission of act in self & the hindering of act in another, This is Vice but all Act is Virtue. To hinder another is not an act it is the contrary it is a restraint on action both in ourselves & in the person hinderd. for he who hinders another omits his own duty. at the time. (annotations to Lavater, E 600-01)

We are so used to thinking or writing in the very terms Blake wished to avoid—i.e., good and evil—that we miss the central point of the annotation, and a lot more in Blake. For example, this is the passage Frye quotes, beginning with "Accident is the omission of act," when he comments that all acts are "good." Bloom also cites it to assert that "Blake's good is the active" and that what "is hindrance and not action is evil"²¹ Paley agrees that "Blake views evil as negative—"Hindering Another."²² Damrosch defies simple logic: "evil actions are not actions at all";²³ he does so because the term evil isn't appropriate to what Blake was writing about. When Frye omits Blake's initial statements regarding causes and consequences and when he and others write about good and evil, they ignore or miss the fact that first and foremost Blake was not commenting about morality—the terms good and evil occur nowhere in the annotation—but about a common misunderstanding

19. Jefferson, *Political Writings* 36.

20. Bloom, "Introduction" 13.

21. Bloom, "Introduction" 12.

22. Paley 15.

23. Damrosch 249.

regarding the true cause of human action. To appreciate fully this profound and central annotation, we need to understand the terms Blake did use, *vice* and *virtue*, and exactly what he intended them to mean and not to mean.

Blake understood virtue in the ancient sense of *virtus* (see Moskal for a similar analysis of virtue in Blake). Used positively by Blake, virtue refers to manliness, worthiness, or excellence. The term signifies not moral rectitude, but a quality or characteristic of a person, as when we say "by virtue of his wisdom or strength," and indicates that the person is acting in a manner consistent with his characteristic genius. Virtue implies action that is the expression of the staminal virtues of humanity, the stamen being the male reproductive organ of a plant; by defining virtue as staminal, Blake meant to distinguish "active masculine virtue" from feminine "passivity" and the "laws of obedience" that repress *virtus* in men especially (*Four Zoas* 43, E 328-29). For Blake, virtue differs from vice not as good differs from evil, but as action that is the expression of internal impulses differs from activity which derives from and is motivated by external causes. Whether these external causes be the moral laws of obedience or even the rules of art laid down by Joshua Reynolds, acting as a consequence of such causes amounts to vice. Along these lines, Blake disagreed with Reynolds' contention that (in Blake's words) "Genius May be Taught" and that "Inspiration is a Lie": "I do not believe that Rafael taught Mich. Angelo or that Mich. Ang. taught Rafael. I do not believe the tales ... [that] militate against Individual Character" (annotations to Reynolds, E 642-43). As Blake saw it, expression or activity is vicious not because it is morally wrong. That is not what Blake meant by vice. He found it vicious simply because it is externally motivated. Vice is the negation of virtue because in life or art it omits, denies, prohibits, or hinders in self and others the expression of intellect and of each person's leading propensities and individual characteristics.

Blake's statement that "all Act is Virtue" is not fundamentally a statement of moral preference, but of fact—not a definition of what is good, but a reminder of the fact that all truly human acts proceed from, are the effects of, one's virtues. Actually to murder or steal, even if done impulsively, could never be virtuous for the reason that it hinders others, as do the commandments not to murder or steal. To be virtuous does not involve the practice or avoidance of any particular set of rules, but means simply to act in such a way so as never to hinder oneself or others as murderers, thieves, and the righteous do.

If the appropriate terms are applied as Blake used them, then we can better understand his central position. Earlier I quoted from Nurmi's definition of what he claims Blake said "'Good & Evil' really are." Here is how he explains it: for Blake what the religious call "Good is the passive that obeys Reason[.] Evil is the active springing from Energy."²⁴ I would modify Nurmi's definition by saying that what the religious call evil

Blake said really is virtue and what they call good really is vice. In other words, Blake's virtue, acting in such a way as to give expression to one's humanity, is what the religious call evil, "the active springing from Energy"; vice, activity which is the result of outside forces moving or hindering us, they name good, "the passive that obeys Reason," in this case the reasons church and state concoct to hinder the expression of one's humanity.

In time, "the restrainer [of desire] or reason usurps its [desire's] place & governs the unwilling" (*Marriage* 5, E 34), so that those whom church and state define as good men are those who do not act on their own desires but are governed by the laws of priests and kings, just as, according to the philosophy of causes and consequences, objects in the material world are presumably governed by the mechanical laws of nature. These unwillingly good people who frequent Blake's works have little or no mind of their own or character to speak of and are always blaming "the Father of the ancient men" or "Priests in black gowns" as the cause for their failures to act on their own, and much like the fox they condemn the trap and not themselves (see "Earth's Answer," E 18; "The Garden of Love," E 26; *Marriage* 8:28, E 36). They are not self-motivated and self-regulated, moving as in Eden by their own desires and impulses, "Wheel within Wheel in freedom ... harmony & peace," but they behave in accordance with mechanistic principles, moving others and being moved by them, "wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic / Moving by compulsion each other" (*Jerusalem* 15:14-20, E 159).

The reason Lavater and his contemporaries mistook not evil for good, but vice for virtue is that they had been misled in their understanding of the way causality operates in all living things. Natural philosophy, the philosophy of causes and consequences, had triumphed by explaining the phenomena of the material world in terms of efficient or mechanical causality, which is to say, every thing was viewed as the cause of every other thing but never as its own cause, the mind for sensationist psychologists being "only a natural organ subject to Sense" (*There is No Natural Religion*, E 2). Blake knew that this view was obviously false, and he presented evidence familiar to everyone to refute it: he noted, for example, that all creatures, such as wolves, camels, bees, and pigeons, have the same sense organs and they should therefore be affected and behave in the same way, yet "are their habitations. / And their pursuits, as different as their forms and as their joys" (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion* 3:2-9, E 47). Similarly, "Every Man has Eyes Nose & Mouth this Every Idiot knows but he who enters into & discriminates most minutely the Manners & Intentions the ... Characters in all their branches is the alone Wise or Sensible Man ..." (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 560). Even though men, like animals, have the same sense organs, "Man varies from Man more than Animal from Animal of Different Species" (annotations to Reynolds, E 656).

Moreover, since each man tends to act according to his character, not circumstances, character rather than circumstance is the ultimate cause of their being honest men or crimi-

24. Nurmi, *William Blake* 70.

nals: "Want of Money & the Distress of A Thief can never be alledged as the Cause of his Thievery. for many honest people endure greater hard ships with Fortitude We must therefore seek the Cause elsewhere than in want of Money ..." (letter to Trusler, 23 August 1799, E 702). Blake dismissed the moral law because, as he showed, it does not aim to promote the good things it claims to be seeking, and, more fundamentally, it is simply an ineffective means for improving or reforming anyone's character: "simple country Hinds are Moral Enthusiasts Indignant against Knavery without a Moral criterion other than Native Honesty untaught while other country Hinds are as indignant against honesty & Enthusiasts for Cunning & Artifice" (annotations to Boyd, E 635). Not that Blake believed men's characters could or ought to be changed. "Individual Identities never change" (*Milton* 32:23, E 132), and it is a fundamental mistake of the moral virtues that they seek to reform men's characters or identities rather than forgive their behavior.

The identity of sense organs, along with the variety of behavior observable in men and animals, proves that such behavior cannot be the effect of sense experience, but has to be the outcome of the different intentions, pursuits, and propensities that each living thing brings into this life. "Every thing in Eternity shines by its own *Internal light*" (*Milton* 10:16, E 104; my italics), and that light remains within us while we are in the world of experience: "Innate Ideas. are in Every Man Born with him" (annotations to Reynolds, E 648). With its uncritical devotion to mechanical causality, however, contemporary philosophy cannot accept that in the living world "Each thing is its own cause" (annotations to Lavater, E 601). It erroneously presumes everything that a person does to "originate in its accident," which is to say that human action is contingent on something else and occurs unintentionally without expressing any essential characteristic of a person's humanity.

The laws of kings and priests derive not from a contemporary error but from the traditional belief that vice is and always remains a basic constituent of human nature, that the staminal virtues of humanity are vicious in and of themselves regardless of how we act. For the king and the priest, goodness does not actually involve or require doing good and not doing evil. Rather, for them, to be good means to suppress one's humanity. Both contemporary and traditional beliefs thus arrive at the same understanding: contemporary philosophy denies that men can and do act in accordance with their leading propensities; traditional religion insists that they shouldn't act in that way. The former holds that each thing is not its own cause, but acts or does not act according to how other persons or things move it, while the laws of kings and priests are established for the express purpose of preventing men from acting in accordance with their humanity. By demanding the omission of act in self, comparable to the scientific law's omission of cause in objects, the moral law aims to destroy the light of humanity that shines within us: it "Darkenest every Internal light ... / ... / That every thing is fixd Opaque without Internal light" (*Milton* 10:17-20, E 104).

According to Blake, the moral virtues (not to be confused with Blake's virtue) inevitably promote (what Blake called) vice, that is, the hindering of action in self and others. So when Frye writes that "evil is negative: all evil consists in either self-restraint or restraint of others,"²⁵ he misses Blake's radically profound analysis of *all* morality, which is that all morality is vicious. Blake described morality as vicious not because he found it evil, but because of the way it works. For him, morality is vicious because it is in the nature of all morality, even that which is devoted to the most praiseworthy ends, to seek to realize its ends by means of hindrance and restraint. That is what Blake objected to in the moral virtues, not necessarily any particular ends they seek, but the means by which they attempt to achieve those ends. Frye's analysis might be better put this way: moral good, as well as moral evil, is negative—all good, along with evil, consists in either self-restraint or restraint of others.

In the last "Memorable Fancy" of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake dramatized his distinction between virtue and vice on the one hand and good and evil on the other. In pl. 3 he has described what the religious call good and evil. In pls. 22-24 he answers them with his own definition of vice and virtue: an Angel insists that "Jesus Christ [has] given his sanction to the law of ten commandments and ... all other men [are] fools, sinners, & nothings." The Devil answers the Angel by listing the commandments he claims Jesus refused to sanction: did not Jesus "murder those who were murdered because of him? ... steal the labor of others to support him?" etc. He concludes from his list that "no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments: Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse: not from rules" (*Marriage* 23-24, E 43).

What the Devil offers is an object lesson in Paul's statement, "By the law we are all condemned," or, as Blake put it, "All Penal Laws court Transgression" (annotations to Watson, *An Apology for the Bible*, E 618). The Devil exposes the Angel as being devoted to the law simply because it establishes a hierarchy of belief which allows some to think of themselves as the only wise. Then the Devil takes it from there, parodying the Angel's attitude by showing how if one is inclined, as angels are, to judge everyone's activity according to the commandments, then he will find transgression everywhere and even Jesus' behavior will not escape condemnation.

After the Devil has had his fun parodying the Angel, he says what he truly believes: Jesus broke the law not because he sought to go against the law, but simply because he acted from impulse and not rules. Moskal believes that Blake "approves antinomianism" while realizing that "it has no independent conceptual foundations" because "any lawbreaking depends ... on prior lawgiving."²⁶ Certainly antinomianism means "against the law," but it is not a term Blake employed,

25. Frye 55.

26. Moskal 12-13.

so we shouldn't depend too heavily on it. Blake's ideal figures are not lawbreakers proclaiming "evil, be thou my good." Lawbreakers don't people his works as they do Schiller's or Byron's or Dostoyevsky's because Blake's ideal figures act not *against* the law, but *independently* of the law, purely according to their own impulses, virtues, and humanity. The poet is such an exemplary figure: whereas "the Philosopher is Dependent & Good," the "Poet is Independent & Wicked" (annotations to Boyd, E 634). The conceptual foundation for the type of person Blake approved of is independent, individual virtue; as the Boyd annotation suggests again, the moral terms of approval or disapprobation, good and wicked, are applied by the religious to actions that might more obviously and more accurately be described simply as dependent or independent. Blake's intent was to show not only that the righteous view good in terms of dependency and obedience and oppose it to wickedness, which they define in terms of independence and impulse, but also that above all they are always applying moral judgment where it need not apply at all.

Whoever ignores the moral law is not an evildoer in Blake's eyes, but ideally someone who goes about his business obeying his humanity by exercising his particular mental gifts and caring not whether anyone's gifts are contrary to his own. Thus Blake's Devil does not contend, as Moskal claims, given her conception of Blake's antinomianism, that "Jesus' actions are motivated by the desire to break each of the commandments."²⁷ How, for example, could Jesus have intended to have his disciples murdered? How could he have known they would have been martyred because of him? Moskal says that Jesus was prompted by "the sheer desire to violate laws" because he "acted from 'impulse, not from rules,'"²⁸ but to act out of a desire to violate the laws is to be moved by the laws and not by one's own impulse. Rebels against the law, such as Orc or Rintrah, are, equally along with those who obey the law, acting in view of the law and not in fulfillment of their desires. The Devil therefore does not assert that Jesus intended to do all the things the Devil pretends he did; rather, as parodist, he demonstrates how Jesus' actions may readily be interpreted as having broken the commandments if one is given to thinking as angels do. After all, anyone is free not to interpret what Jesus or anyone else did or does in moral terms.

The Devil's conclusion is a simple one, once we learn to fathom it. Like the Lavater annotation, it has to do with the springs of action: to act on impulse is by its very nature not to act by rules, and this according to the Devil is what it means to act virtuously. Virtuous action is described here, as in the annotation, as action which is self-motivated. Blake did not describe Jesus as good because he acted on impulse, but as virtuous. So, for example, if Jesus had honored his father and mother because the law commanded it, he would of course have been obeying the law and he would have been a good

person for doing so, but he would not have been acting virtuously. If, however, Jesus had honored them on impulse, he would have been acting virtuously, but in so doing, he would have been breaking the law for no other reason than that his action was not obedient to it because it had been motivated by impulse operating independently of the law. For Blake, no virtue can exist without breaking the law simply because virtuous action is undertaken without considering what any law commands.

Here and elsewhere, Blake insisted that any genuinely virtuous individual can readily reject what the righteous demand because the crucial concern they have is not whether a person acts in ways that are good or bad, but dependent or independent—whether he acts obediently and not according to his own internal light. The problem the lawgiver would have with Blake's virtuous individual is not that he does the wrong thing, but that he does the right thing—or the wrong thing—for the wrong reason, that is, he is motivated by his own individual conscience and not by what the law tells him to do. Similarly, the problem Blake had with those whom the religious call "good" is not necessarily that they are doing wrong in his eyes, but that they are not virtuous individuals who genuinely express what they think, feel, and believe. No man, however good his behavior, can be considered virtuous who does good because he feels compelled to or for his personal advantage. You can't be virtuous if you do the right thing for the wrong reasons, and Blake called for absolute freedom from the Mosaic law, the laws of the kings and priests, not because he abhorred everything they thought holy. He called for freedom even from good laws because no man can be virtuous in his or anyone else's eyes who does good simply because the law requires it.

As the Leveller William Walwyn noted in 1646, "every man ought to be free in the worship and service of God—compulsion being the way to increase, not the number of converts, but the number of hypocrites."²⁹ Blake had a name for these seemingly good men. He, too, called them hypocrites and also knaves. Knaves are "Christians in outward appearance," but "still a Knave." They are never anything but orthodox, always conforming and giving expression to received opinion: "all the Commentators on the Bible are Dishonest Designing Knaves who in hopes of a good living adopt the State religion." Because he is always striving to become like everyone else, a conventionally good person is someone who has "No Con-Science" and is "full of Self-Contradiction" (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 564; annotations to Watson, *An Apology for the Bible*, E 616; annotations to Reynolds, E 648). His outward appearance and behavior cannot be trusted to express what he truly thinks and feels, as is the case, for example, with Theotormon's "hypocrite modesty" (*Visions of the Daughters of Albion* 6:16, E 49).

27. Moskal 20.

28. Moskal 38.

29. Walwyn 15.

Since Blake wrote, numerous anthropologists and sociologists have observed exactly what he understood, that in almost all societies we know of morality is chiefly little more than an attempt to enforce social cohesion. As Thomas Jefferson noted: "Millions of innocent men, women, and children since the introduction of Christianity have been burnt, tortured, fined, [and] imprisoned" and for no other purpose than "to produce uniformity of opinion."³⁰ In almost every society, the measure of the goodness or badness of a person is typically not his or her beneficent or malevolent behavior, but his or her conformity to or deviance from certain arbitrarily established codes of conduct, without regard to what those codes entail or whether violating them would indeed harm anyone. A thoroughgoing nonconformist who "read[s] white" where others "readst black" (*Everlasting Gospel*, E 524) and whose writings are bursting with seditious, obscene, heretical, and blasphemous statements, Blake felt the pressures to conformity all his life:

O why was I born with a different face
Why was I not born like the rest of my race
When I look each one starts! when I speak I offend
Then I'm silent & passive & lose every Friend

Then my verse I dishonour. My pictures despise
My person degrade & my temper chastise
And the pen is my terror. the pencil my shame
All my Talents I bury, and Dead is my Fame
(letter to Butts, 16 August 1803, E 733)

The charge of treason which occasioned these lines was a painful reminder of the danger nonconformity posed to himself and his art, but it also illustrated once again that the moral virtues are not concerned with "whether a Man has Talents. & Genius? But whether he is Passive & Polite & a Virtuous Ass: & obedient If he is; he is a Good Man" (annotations to Reynolds, E 642). The aim of the Accuser is not to identify wrongdoers, but to impose his "principles of moral individuality," and make just men do "what he knows is opposite to their own Identity" (*Milton* 9:26, E 103; *Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 565), just as the churches transform the man who disdains "to follow this Worlds Fashion" into an "Antichrist Creeping Jesus," who is "Humble as a Lamb or Ass" (*Everlasting Gospel*, E 519, 520; for morality as conformity in Blake, see also Blackstone, especially 271ff.).

When Blake said, through Los, "I care not whether a Man is Good or Evil" (*Jerusalem* 91:54, E 252), he understood that an utter disregard for the moral law, as epitomized in Jesus' impulsively virtuous actions, would in no way undermine a person's moral fitness. Of what consequence can it be whether a man conforms to or deviates from the law? Any hypocrite or knave can conform to the law and any truly virtuous man can be condemned by it—the crucifixion of Jesus being history's

supreme example of a virtuous man the law destroyed. As Jefferson noted, there have been millions more.

What Blake saw in those whom society praises as good men is nothing more than conformity, hypocrisy, and knavery ("laws of obedience & insincerity / Are my abhorrence [*Four Zoas* 43:10-11, E 329]). He was, however, no dismissive moral nihilist, but presented to his readers the ideal of an honestly virtuous man who does not resist "his genius or conscience. only for the sake of present ease or gratification" (*Marriage* 13, E 39). He insisted, moreover, that "God ... loves all honest men," and "God does & always did converse with honest Men." When honest men express themselves, they do so as God's prophets, since the "voice of honest indignation is the voice of God" (annotations to Lavater, E 598; annotations to Watson, *An Apology for the Bible*, E 615; *Marriage* 12, E 38). There "will always be as many Hypocrites born as Honest Men" (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 564); still and all, we can reliably put our trust in honest persons because they always act according to who they are and what they think, feel, and believe, since they will permit nothing in the world of experience to change or destroy the virtues that define them:

Conscience in those that have it is unequivocal, it is the voice of God If Conscience is not a Criterion of Moral Rectitude What is it? He who thinks that Honesty is changeable knows nothing about it Virtue & honesty or the dictates of Conscience are of no doubtful Signification to any one[.] Opinion is one Thing. Princip[le] another. No Man can change his Principles[.] Every Man changes his opinions. He who supposes that his Principles are to be changed is a Dissembler who Disguises his Principles (annotations to Watson, *An Apology for the Bible*, E 613)

Sin

Some readers may be bothered and even disappointed by Blake's emphasis on sin insofar as they see him departing from his more radical approach to the moral virtues and in his later works to be "increasingly driven back upon a conception which comes close to the traditional idea of sin."³¹

We can only speculate as to what motivated Blake to take up the issue of sin. Perhaps he felt as a Christian that he could not ignore it any longer and needed to address what just about every other Christian believed to be a real and most serious problem. Yet his attitude toward it was hardly close to established traditional views, and differed from orthodox conceptions so significantly on major aspects that one might suggest that he was driven to the idea of sin precisely because he wished his readers to reconsider their traditional understanding of it.

When writing about what was and is thought to be the most terrible accusation a Christian can level against anyone—that he is a sinner—Blake contended that sin does not, as tradi-

30. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* 153.

31. Damrosch 249.

tion tells us, make us an "outcast from the Divine Presence" (*Jerusalem* 78:33, E 234), for "Sin is [not] displeasing to God," although the accusation of sin, "Eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil," is (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 564). Contrary to traditional belief, Blake said he did not "consider ... the Just ... to be in a Supreme State" and held that "Holiness is not The Price of Entrance into Heaven" (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 563, 564). If the later Blake did indeed find sin real enough, he nevertheless insisted that it really is no big deal: "What is Sin," he wrote, "but a little / Error & fault that is soon forgiven" (*Jerusalem* 20:23-24, E 165).

"What was it," Kazin wonders, "that made him long at the end, above everything else, for 'forgiveness'?" Blake, he assumes, carried a "tremendous burden of guilt."³² Yet that guilt and longing don't show up in his letters. In his address "To the Public" (*Jerusalem* 3, E 145), Blake did call himself "most sinful," but consider how he put it: "I am perhaps the most sinful of men! I pretend not to holiness! yet I pretend to love" Perhaps the most sinful? We can easily infer from Blake's qualification that he was not terribly concerned with whether he was or was not most sinful. He was, however, most definite about the claim, which he stated without qualification, that he did not pretend to be holy and sought to love. That is what is stated most forcefully because it is of overwhelming importance. Accordingly, if Blake's characters can be said to long for anything, it is to be free of condemnation rather than guilt. In the end, almost all of the references to sin come not in the form of mea culpa confessions, but of accusations individuals direct against those whom they should rather forgive and befriend. However much Blake came to write about sin, it would appear that the depth or extent of sin itself never concerned him terribly much. Instead, he took up the issue to insist that men should not trouble themselves and especially not burden others over it.

To the end, the problem Blake saw humanity facing hasn't to do with the sinner, but with the "Accuser" who "condemns ... Sin" and "all those ... who Calumniate & Murder <under Pretence of Holiness & Justice>" (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 565, 558). The problem of sin comes down to the same old problem of righteousness that Blake saw as the cause of cruelty, dominance, and enmity between those who should be brothers, friends, and lovers. The difference in the later works is that these issues are examined not so much as they were earlier on, in terms of the individual's relation to religious, political, and legal institutions and their oppressive codes and laws, but more so in terms of the ruinous effect they have on personal relations—on two or more individuals who could otherwise be close to each other in loving relationships were it not for the compulsion to accuse and condemn. Blake's ultimate aim in bringing up the idea of sin was not to examine or reexamine the nature of sin, nor to recommend how to avoid it, but to use a term familiar to everyone to take aim at

the same targets he always focused on so as to save "those who have sinned [not from sin, but] from the punishment of the Law" (*Jerusalem* 31:6, E 177).

When Oothoon announces in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* that she is pure (2:28, E 47), she is certainly not citing any change that has occurred within her, since she never was polluted. Later, in one of the finest and most insightful passages Blake or anyone else has ever written on the nature of sin and forgiveness (*Jerusalem* 61, E 211-12), he allowed that Mary's sin is real enough, and that is perhaps where the difference lies when we read the later Blake. It is, however, an insignificant difference to the extent that it does not affect in any way Blake's attitude toward what he understood to be the source of all our woe. As always, it is the accusation of sin, this time coming from Joseph as formerly from Theotormon, and not the sin itself, which Blake showed to be the cause of continued suffering and that which needs to be addressed and remedied. Indeed, a relatively early work like *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* offers Blake's most extensive, in-depth study of how happy love is tormented by the imputation of sin and pollution. It is a position Blake maintained to the end.

In his *A Fiery Flying Roll* (1649), Abiezer Coppe proclaimed, "Sin and transgression is finished and ended ... [.] Be no longer so ... wicked, as to judge what is sin, what not." Around the same time, Edward Burrough wrote that the "saints of God may be perfectly freed from sin in this life so as no more to commit it."³³ Despite Blake's obvious affinities with and the possible influences of the radical nonconformists noted by Moskal, E. P. Thompson, and others, Blake never held that men could be freed from sin. Even so, he remained an antinomian to the end. The "stress on forgiveness in Blake's prophetic writing after 1800 might be regarded as antinomian in this sense": it "promised unconditional forgiveness for what it still recognized as sin."³⁴

Indeed, we might go so far as to suggest that the stress on sin in the later Blake, his insistence that "There is none that liveth & Sinneth not!" (*Jerusalem* 61:24, E 212), seeks to identify a fundamental equality among all humanity and is alluded to for the specific purpose of disallowing anyone's right to assume a position of moral authority over his fellow men. Blake was no egalitarian when it came to defining the greater or lesser genius in men. The "Worship of God," he wrote, is honoring and "loving the greatest men best, each according / To his Genius" (*Jerusalem* 91:7-9, E 251). Yet he always insisted that in terms of right or wrong no man living has any claim to greater moral superiority over any other man. The earlier Blake tended to focus on the invalidity of all moral systems; later he took a more personal view, adopting the notion that every man sins to show how we are all morally equal. The stress in the later Blake is not on the division between sin and purity—that is never a concern—but on the difference be-

32. Kazin 53-54.

33. Quoted in Hill 121, 202.

34. Mee 58.

tween him who acknowledges that he is "sinful" like everyone else and does not "pretend ... to holiness" and the "Hypocrite ... whose profession is Virtue & Morality & the making Men Self-Righteous Pharisees & Hypocrites ... talking of the Virtues ... particularly of your own, that you may accuse others" (*Jerusalem* 3, "To the Public," E 145; 52, "To the Deists," E 201).

Blake initially responded to the requirements of the moral law with his rebellious devils and libertines who characteristically ignore or dismiss it, but, as it were, thereby leave the law standing to continue to dominate the vulgar. His concept of sin in the later works directly addresses the issue of righteousness in a way that encompasses all humanity. The alternative he presented is formerly the extraordinary, individual genius who is above the law (though of course that figure never entirely disappears). In the later works, he depicted the ordinary sinner who is ready to forgive those who have sinned against him. Blake found in sin, or more precisely, the idea that everyone is equally a sinner, an all-inclusive positive alternative to righteous condemnation that had been missing in his earlier works. Therein lies the crucial difference, that all men are alike insofar as no one can honestly proclaim that he is good and good alone (*Everlasting Gospel*, E 521), or say, as Tharmas' Spectre does, "If thou hast sinnd & art polluted know that I am pure / And unpolluted & will bring to rigid strict account / All thy past deeds" (*Four Zoas* 6:10-12, E 303).

We might finally sum up Blake's objections to morality as coming from two different directions and giving voice to two basic concerns. The one has to do with all legal systems from Moses and Plato on down, and that is obvious enough. The other has to do with the fact that individuals and humanity as a whole are being held responsible and condemned not for their behavior, but for their propensities, desires, and virtues. Blake's insistence that we ought not to define a man's character in terms of either good or evil, that we must stop calumniating against and condemning the virtues of humanity as vicious and sinful, goes to the heart of the problem Christianity bequeathed when it sought to bring psychological states of mind under the rule of moral law. With the very first Christians, the intent and hope most probably were to liberate their people from ritual and law and make the religious life a matter of spiritual enlightenment and refinement, but the outcome among the established churches was to make men and women accountable to others and a dark burden to themselves for their mental, spiritual, and imaginative life. Blake's writings seek to recover the initial hopes of primitive Christianity while relieving internal states of consciousness of the moral scrutiny traditional Christianity had subjected them to. How one thinks and feels is nobody's business but one's own, and Blake's business was always to free our mental lives from the accusation of sin. Together with his objections to the Mosaic and other sacred codes, it pretty much covers all that Blake found fundamentally wrong with traditional and conventional morality.

The Marquis de Sade, the Boston Strangler, Jack the Ripper were relatively insignificant men. No pervert, serial killer, or so-called mass murderer can match the cruelty and bloodshed the righteous have brought down upon us all. François Jacob, Nobel scientist and resistance fighter against the Nazis, got it quite right when he said, "All crimes in history ..., [a]ll massacres have been carried out ... in the name of the fight against somebody else's truth"³⁵ Blake got it right too. "All Quarrels," he contended, "arise from Reasoning" (*Jerusalem* 64:20, E 215). He knew that it is not primarily those we call evil men who cause us the greatest amount of misery and pain, but reasonable and holy men who hinder and destroy us, all in the name of morality, truth, and virtue. Who, after all, mobilizes a people to fight for evil and lies? Blake understood that those whom he called the fiends of righteousness have not somehow gone wrong by perverting a moral ideal intended to do good, because he recognized that religion and morality do not seek to promote honest virtue. The righteous destroy us because, as Blake knew and had the honesty and courage to say, organized religion and the moral virtues have always had as their primary aim the destruction of our intellect, our passions, our freedom, our humanity, and often our very lives. "State Religion," he warned, "is the Source of all Cruelty" and is the "Abomination that maketh desolate," and he called for the overthrow of all its rituals in the hope of a future time when the "dark Religions are departed" (annotations to Watson, *An Apology for the Bible*, E 618; *Jerusalem* 91:12-14, E 251; *Four Zoas*, last line, E 407).

Before Mill's *On Liberty* expressed one of the central concerns of modern liberalism, that political democracy carries no guarantee of individual freedom or civil liberty, Blake understood that the political freedom men of the modern age were fighting for and often winning would not suffice to gain liberty for all. Liberty for all cannot be achieved in any society where men persist in troubling themselves and others with good and evil, the chief destroyers of our liberties in the post-Edenic world: "You cannot have Liberty in this World without <what you call> Moral Virtue & you cannot have Moral Virtue without the Slavery of that half of the Human Race who hate <what you call> Moral Virtue" (*Vision of the Last Judgment*, E 564). Extending the franchise would not suffice to attain liberty for all in this world.

Combining the Protestant idea of the inviolability of the individual conscience, especially pronounced among the English nonconformist sects, with libertarian and rights-of-man principles of the Enlightenment, Blake insisted throughout his writings that without the hindrances church and state institute, men and women can lead richer and fuller lives within better and more productive societies. His understanding of the conditions that allow for virtuousness among all men we now recognize to be the basis for the call in modern times for religious freedom and eventually civil liberties and indi-

35. Jacob x.

vidual rights. Blake thus stood as a key transition figure who drew upon past and present conceptions of liberty that were to become the cornerstones of modern liberal democracies. He called for a society of virtuous men, a society, that is, in which every individual would be free to follow his own conscience—one of universal toleration without martyrdoms, wars, or dominancy, based on the recognition that there can be no single abode of holiness and that every man's wisdom is peculiar to his individuality. The foundation of this society is not religion, but art and science, and it is to be composed of virtuosi who, to the extent that they do not hinder the acts of others, are free in mind and body to gratify their desires and act upon their leading propensities so that they may give expression to the spirit and genius within each and every one of them.

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NEWSLETTER

Nelson Hilton joined us as the journal's first—and only—review editor in 1980. He has been the stalwart and expert editorial companion to us ever since. The pleasure of working alongside Nelson issue after issue, year after year, has been constant, and we will miss him profoundly, although he will continue to offer advice as a member of our advisory board. His excuse for ducking out on us now is, unfortunately, credible, as in addition to developing the University of Georgia's general composition electronic markup and management application (www.emmalogin.org) and teaching, he is now director of the university's Center for Teaching and Learning. Nelson concludes, "So, time to shed load—with a big shout-out to the many colleagues who agreed to undertake reviews, the two who long ago imagined a greenhorn as review editor, and all who have made working with *BIQ* a profound pleasure and liberal education."

Meanwhile, we are exceedingly proud to welcome as our new review editor Alexander (Sandy) Gourlay, who teaches courses on British literature, art history, and paleography at the Rhode Island School of Design, including an annual seminar on Hogarth and Blake. He has published several articles on Blake and edited *Prophetic Character: Essays on William Blake in Honor of John E. Grant*. He is working now on a web-based resource for studying Blake's *Night Thoughts* watercolors. In his own words, Sandy "aspires in time to live up to the high standard set in this position by Nelson Hilton, and welcomes such encomia, constructive advice, and intemperate abuse as the readership sees fit to impart."

We anticipate, with great pleasure, years of superior reviewing under Sandy's leadership.

[Morris Eaves and Morton D. Paley, editors]