

William Blake vs Richard Dawkins & The God Delusion

Tharmas

Urthona

Adam

Eve

Urizen

Keith G. Davies



The Rift Between Science & Imagination

Now I a fourfold vision see
And a fourfold vision is given to me
Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
And three fold in soft Beulahs night
And twofold Always. May God us keep
From Single vision & Newtons sleep
(Letter to Thomas Butts, 22 November 1802, ll. 83-88, E722)

In 2006 Richard Dawkins set out his intellectual position as a strident atheist in his book *The God Delusion*. Interestingly, in the preface to his book he makes reference to John Lennon's song 'Imagine' and he proposes his reader to imagine a world without religion. By adapting Blake's fourfold vision, I will explore a new model in the light of Dawkins's *The God Delusion*.

Plato vs Darwin

Thomas Taylor (1758-1835) was a Londoner, a contemporary of Blake, and as a literary scholar and mathematician had translated Plato into English. He had rejected Christianity in favour of paganism and wrote twelve lectures on Platonic philosophy which he delivered at the house of Blake's friend, John Flaxman (1755-1826). As Foster Damon states, 'it would be straining credulity too far to suppose that Blake was not there, and did not make Taylor's acquaintance' (1988: 397). Whether Blake attended Taylor's lectures or not, Blake's view of the world was that of an essentialist, a view expressed in *Milton* that can be traced back to Plato and his student Aristotle (Davies 2000: 135). Fundamentally this is an *idealist* view of the world where 'Whatever can be Created can be Annihilated: Forms cannot: The Oak is cut down by the Ax, the Lamb falls by the Knife, But their Forms Eternal Exist Forever' (*Milton*, pl. 32, ll. 35-38, E132). This contrasts with a *realist* view of the world based on materialism in which the material items before us, tables and chairs, cats and dogs etc., are each real as entities and the names we give them are abstractions. Each individual table or chair, cat or dog, is different and the collective name we give them is an umbrella term which is abstracted from what the individuals have in common. It is the materialist view of reality that comes to us today articulated by scientist like Dawkins.

Let's unpack these ideas with an example. If I lined up four pints of beer on a bar, each glass holds a 'pint of beer', but if I weighed each of the four pints of beer, with very accurate scales, they would all be slightly different. In my mind I have an abstract notion, or an essence, of an *ideal* 'pint of beer', but in reality they are all different. According to the late Professor Ernst Mayr (1982: 38) it was Darwin who first rejected essentialism as it required the saltational creation of new essences, whereas evolution is gradual. In biology saltation theory is a process by which speciation occurs as a large single step and Dawkins has convincingly focused his writing to show how evolution through natural selection operates by the accumulation of small changes to produce each new species. But underlying this argument is a philosophical and religious discussion on the nature of the world and the nature of God.

According to the biologist John S. Haldane (1931: 128-30) this pivots between two truths, *idealism* attributable to Plato and based on essentialism, and *realism* that objects have an existence independent of perception. On the one hand *idealism* would suggest our perceptions are not real but are approximate manifestations of perfect unmanifest essences. While on the other hand, *realism* suggests the opposite, our perceptions are based on material manifestations that are real i.e. non-essentialist and can be attributed to Darwin. Interestingly the philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753), who died just a few years before Blake's birth, was an advocate of a view that material objects only exist if being perceived. This philosophy is likely to have influenced Blake in his 'Proverbs of Hell' where he declares, 'Where man is not, nature is barren' (pl. 10, l. 68, E38); for Berkeley the reality of any material object rested on an ever present, all-perceiving God, whereas for Blake it rested with man.

Blake's Four Zoas

In November 1802 William Blake wrote a letter to Thomas Butts which finishes with a series of three couplets quoted at the beginning of the essay. Here, Blake admonishes Newton for his 'Single vision' (l. 88, E722). Newton, a unitarian, is arguably the instigator of the mechanical universe in which the material planets obey his laws of motion.

To Blake this unitarian approach was an abomination! So, let's build up Blake's fourfold vision as the phrase appears continually throughout his work. The phrase 'two-fold Always' (l. 87, E722), separates the external physical world of the material universe, what René Descartes

would refer to as *Res extensa*, from each of our mental models of that material world, and what he would refer to as *Res cognita*, or mind. For Blake, the mind had two contrary aspects that worked in conjunction with each other, our reason paired with our imagination. Proceeding, that leaves 'three fold in soft Beulahs night' (l. 86, E722). This refers to a paradisaical state of marriage or union between the sexes; it is the creative impulse for generation that leads to the manifestation of heaven on earth, hence the proverb, 'Eternity is in love with the productions of time' (*Marriage*, pl. 7, l. 10, E36). And finally, in *Milton*, which builds upon the earlier poem *Paradise Lost* and claims, 'To Justify the Ways of God to Man' (pl. 1 [i], l. 2, E95), there is a page containing his image 'Mundane Egg' (pl. 33 [36], E133). This image is key and consists of four quadrants that are fundamental to his fourfold vision of the human being.

Blake's 'Mundane Egg' consists of four quadrants, or *Zoas*, as he called them; one Zoa labelled Tharmas (physical body) is paired with another, Luvah (feelings and generation), with a third, Urizen (reason) paired with the final Zoa, Urthona (imagination). All quadrants are embedded in a flame-filled, unmanifest universe. These quadrants make up Blake's four-fold vision, that, with certain artistic licence, can be mapped onto Christendom's Holy Trinity (see Davies 2024); God the Father (physical body and feelings), God the Son (reason and imagination), and God the Holy Ghost (unmanifest spirit). Remember, Blake was an essentialist who was able to write his 'Proverbs of Hell', 'Thus men forget that All deities reside in the human breast' (*Marriage*, pl. 11, E38), and in a discussion on the divinity of Jesus with Henry Crabb Robinson, Blake continued, 'He is the only God ... And so am I and so are you' (Higgs 2021: 3). This is a theistic view that many Christians would find blasphemous, but to Blake, Jesus in measure *is* imagination, and as imagination embraces all humanity.

The Cliffs of Memory

Today, Blake's 'Mundane Egg' is misaligned; there is an imbalance in which reason reigns at the expense of imagination. Blake was, as we all are, products of our respective times, and from the dawn of the scientific age our understanding of the world has been rapidly changing. Nobody has the monopoly on knowledge, and Dawkins's *God delusion*, which champions a materialistic form of intellect that espouses reason over imagination, is dangerous indeed. However, at the beginning of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins accepts an Einsteinian notion of God, and I have no reason to believe he would

not endorse Einstein's statement, 'Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution' (2009: 97). We must not throw the baby out with the bathwater and abandon imagination.

There is a tension within contemporary science; on the one hand there are people like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett (2006) who espouse a reductive and an atheistic position, while others, like Denis Noble (2006), and I include myself here, are more holistic and more circumspect. Interestingly, Stephen Hawking (2018: 38), the theoretical physicist, asks the question 'Is there a God?' He is equivocal and states, 'When people ask me if a God created the universe, I tell them the question makes no sense. ... It's like asking for directions to the edge of the Earth – the Earth is a sphere that doesn't have an edge'. But Hawking (2018: 211) finishes his book with a plea for us to unleash our imaginations. Blake, who was of the view that the world was flat (Higgs, 2021: 2), lived in an age of the growing British Empire, an Empire based on an Anglican faith and the economic philosophy of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (Davies 2023: 17-33). Arguably the cause of today's environmental crisis is a failure of imagination and that is why I would agree with John Higgs (2019), 'Why He [Blake] Matters More Than Ever'.

References and further reading

- Davies, Keith G., 'Creative Tension: What links Aristotle, William Blake, Darwin and GM Crops?', *Nature*, 407 (2000), 135
- *William Blake, the Single Vision and Newton's Sleep: A History of Science, Poetry and Progress* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2023)
- 'A Scientific Legacy, Blake's Romantic Impulse and its Consequences for our Industrial Revolution', in *Literature and Science in the 19th Century*, ed. by Pamala K. Gilbert (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2024)
- Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion* (London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland, Johannesburg: Bantam Press, 2006)
- Dennett, Daniel, *Breaking the Spell: Religion and a Natural Phenomenon* (London: Penguin Books, 2006)
- Einstein, Albert, *On Cosmic Religion* (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 2009)
- Foster, Damon, S., *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (New England, Hanover and London: Brown University Press, 1988)

Haldane, John S., *The Philosophical Basis of Biology* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1931)

Hawking, Stephen, *Brief Answers to the Big Questions* (London: John Murray, 2018)

Higgs, John, *William Blake vs The World* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2021)

——— *William Blake Now: Why He Matters More Than Ever* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019)

Mayr, Ernst, *The Growth of Biological Thought: Diversity, Evolution and Inheritance* (Cambridge: Belknap, Harvard University Press, 1982)

Noble, Denis, *The Music of Life: Biology Beyond Genes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

