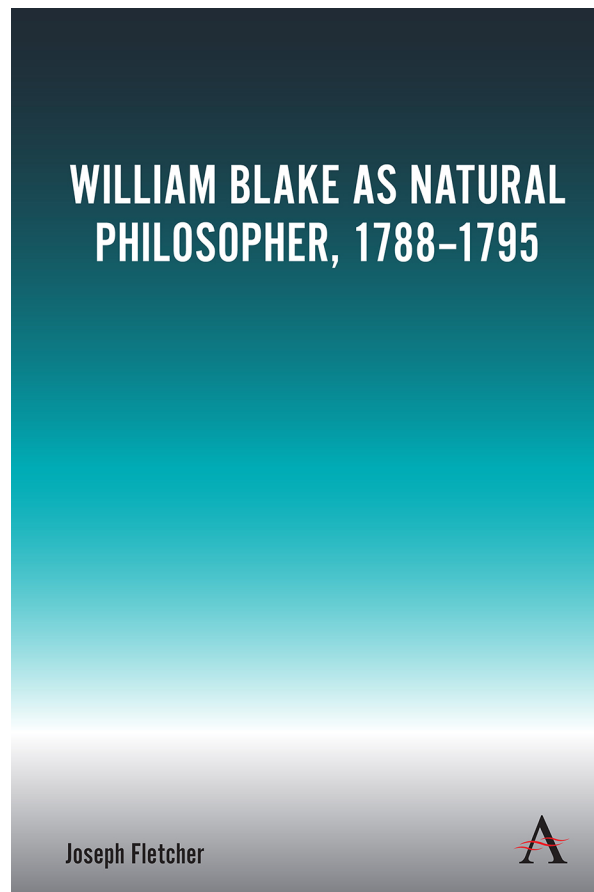


Joseph Fletcher. *William Blake as Natural Philosopher, 1788–1795*. London: Anthem Press, 2022. viii + 264 pp. £80.00/\$125.00, hardcover; £25.00/\$40.00, e-book.

Reviewed by James Rovira

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1 JOSEPH Fletcher's *William Blake as Natural Philosopher, 1788–1795* dedicates itself to the task of defining Blake's position on a variety of questions asked by eighteenth-century natural science, which in contemporary terms consisted of a mixture of philosophy of science, philosophy of nature, and empirical study. Because Blake wrote poetry that at times appears simple while being very complex, and that at other times drops all pretenses to simplicity, I believe that this task is doomed to fail. Apart from the inherent difficulties of translating literature into philosophy or science, Blake often presents the added difficulty of juxtaposing a number of highly developed, varying subjectivities and points of view within the same work, so that it's nearly impossible to identify any one point of view with the author's own. Does he adopt any one character's point of view as his own, or does he occupy a third position located outside the text, only observing the interplay of these characters and their ideas, perhaps agreeing with some characters' ideas but not others? Additionally, Blake writes in a mythological mode. Are his characters even human? Are they anthropomorphic representations of social or psychological forces? Something else? How would we define the natural philosophy of a mythological figure, and what kind



of evidence could we present to align that view with Blake's own?

2 However difficult or even impossible the task, attempting it helps us more fully understand Blake. An exposition of his relationship to eighteenth-century natural philosophy can (and certainly does in Fletcher's work) illuminate representations of the natural world in his works as well as larger questions about the nature and existence of God and the relationship of God to the material universe. It's possible that one of the greatest insights into Blake that Fletcher offers is the interrelatedness of these two questions: What was Blake's religion or theology? Where did he stand in terms of the natural philosophy of his day? Fletcher's monograph therefore yields significant insights, particularly in terms of the breadth of figures in natural philosophy that he covers and his care in reading them closely. He also mitigates some of the pitfalls inherent to analyzing a moving target such as Blake by using two strategies. First, he deliberately limits the time frame of his study to a seven-year period, 1788 to 1795, which seems necessary both to the level of detail of his argument and to the fact that even within that limited time frame, according to Fletcher's argument,

Blake's position continually evolves. Presenting an evolving Blake is Fletcher's second mitigating strategy: it keeps him from bluntly imposing a single thesis on his material as he registers changes in Blake's ideas over time, leading to some reversals by the end of the period under consideration.

- 3 Fletcher follows the evolution of Blake's natural philosophy in four chapters, followed by a coda, that pair Blake's works with European natural philosophers from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, each chapter focused on a different area of natural philosophy. Chapter 1 juxtaposes *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion* against Locke's "natural religion or deism" from a point of view close to Leibniz's "anti-Lockean, anti-Newtonian panpsychism," aligning Blake with panpsychism and a view of nature that is "dynamic" and "transformative" (15). In the process, Fletcher strengthens his case for sympathy between Blake and Leibniz by contrasting Blake's views with Berkeley's. For example, he distinguishes Blake from Berkeley on the concept of "vision," which for Blake is a matter of insight provided by "the innate Poetic Genius" (23), while for Berkeley vision is associated only with sensory organs. Later in the chapter, he draws upon Hume to better define Blake's critique of natural religion, and he ends with a discussion of how Blake's designs reinforce his claims. The position on which Fletcher settles is that Blake's and Leibniz's "material universe is infinite and ensouled" (41). In this account, Blake's God is coextensive with the material universe, animating it and giving it mind (panpsychism), so that God and the material universe are in a state of continual and mutual becoming. If this reading is valid, then Blake is a significant predecessor of process theology.
- 4 Chapter 2, "Soul Matter: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Monist Pantheism," "focuses on three sets of philosophical 'contraries' introduced in *The Marriage*: soul/body, God/material world[,] and imagination (Poetic Genius)/sensory perception" (45), reinforcing Blake's emphasis on the mutuality and interdependence of these contraries. This long, complex chapter integrates discussion of multiple figures, from Plato to the eighteenth century, which is simultaneously its weakness and its strength. The close reading of these figures (and others throughout) by itself justifies the existence of the book and draws out a number of suggestive possibilities for future readings of Blake. According to Fletcher, Blake's goal is the "dissolution of dualistic metaphysics—a marriage of contraries—and a proclamation of monism" (45). He observes how early in *Marriage* "the body is indistinguishable from the soul," citing Aristotle's conception of the soul in *De anima* and other works "describing soul-body interfusion by Plato, the Neoplatonists and Stoic and Epicurean philosophers" (46) as background to Blake. Fletcher's history of ideas proceeds through Hobbes, Descartes, Locke, and Newton, leading up to

Priestley. He then ends with a discussion of Blake's epistemology related to this subject, asking *how* we know what we know about the soul to draw attention to Blake's emphasis on imagination over the senses. Fletcher associates Blake with a "Platonically derived pantheism" (49), so that Blake identifies God not only with humanity but with the entire material universe. He associates Blake's identification of soul and body with "Aristotelian hylomorphism" (53), which asserts that all of nature consists of a compound of matter and form, so that all beings are composite in nature. Overall, Blake's position here locates "God solely in material beings" (95), so that we live in a "pantheistic universe of motile, energized bodies that, as hylomorphic entities, are themselves—humans, animals, plants and all nonorganic forms—inextricably infused with soul, or divinity" (100); Fletcher elaborates later that this is a Spinozan (monist), panpsychist pantheism (101).

- 5 So far, Fletcher's first two chapters have described a transition in Blake's thought from "panpsychist pantheism to monist pantheism" (113). Chapter 3, "Breathing Dust: Erasmus Darwin and Blake's Regenerative Materialism," backgrounds Blake's monist pantheism (while still asserting it) to focus more on his critique of dualism, seeing that critique in Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* and the early tracts, *Marriage*, and then *Thel*, *Europe*, and *The Song of Los*. Regarding Darwin, Fletcher claims that his "poetic equating of plant and human sexual behavior in *The Loves of the Plants* is an early instance of the concept of flat ontology in his work" (116), a concept held contra the Great Chain of Being. He draws interesting parallels between Darwin and Blake, associating Darwin's note on "Central Fires" and his ideas about "the sun's fire as a vital principle inherent in matter: both poets draw on ancient ideas concerning this material celestial flame"; he even identifies Darwin's "second sun at the center of the earth" with Blake's title-page illustration for *Marriage* (120). Blake and Darwin similarly personify flora (127). Fletcher's reading of the character of *Thel* is that ultimately "her flight marks a failure to embrace the monist panpsychist/pantheist philosophy that is described in *The Botanic Garden* and *The Marriage*, and which is shared by *Thel*'s nonhuman characters" (143). He presents a *Europe* that "illustrates, on a broader scale than does *Thel*, the multiple ways in which a dualist metaphysics that removes divinity from the material world constitutes a binding of the infinite and the implementation of hierarchical power structures and the forms of oppression that follow therefrom" (166). Similarly, *The Song of Los* "demonstrates affinities with Darwin's vital materialism," and "Blake makes his monist, pantheist argument in the poem's conclusion, which, unlike the endings of *Thel* and *Europe*, conveys a hylozoist image of material regeneration" (167). Chapter 3, overall, presents a view of Blake's natural philosophy that has not evolved from the one described in chap-

ter 2—Blake is still a “monist pantheist”—but rather that shows Blake’s elaboration on the implications of that position.

- 6 In chapter 4, “Horrible Forms of Deformity”: The Urizen Cycle and Vitalist Materialism,” Fletcher pits “vitalist natural philosophies,” on the one hand, and Newtonian science, on the other, against Blake’s own position as articulated in the Urizen books: *The [First] Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania*, and *The Book of Los*. Both vitalism and Newtonian science, though opposed to one another, in Fletcher’s opinion occlude “the living, intelligent, energetic flames that comprise the infinite, divine universe” (179). The Urizen books in fact dramatize the opposition between vitalist natural philosophies and Newtonian science and, additionally, mark Blake’s “turn away from [his] early poetic and visual expressions of pantheistic monism” (180). In Fletcher’s reading, when Blake opposes “Eternity and Urizenic creation” he is not pitting immaterialism against materialism but “divisive, self-contemplating isolation” against “community and interdependence” (189). Fletcher engages Newton’s *Principia* in this chapter as well as Voltaire’s popularization of Newton. He likens the imagery associated with Urizen’s creation to the creation “of the earth and astral bodies in [Plato’s] *Timaeus*” (192), and curiously asserts that “the Eternals, including Urizen and Los, are material,” so that Blake is drawing from “Epicurean metaphysics, which likewise does not posit a creator god, but rather argues that matter has always existed” (200).
- 7 Fletcher builds upon previous work comparing Blake’s ideas in the Urizen books to William Harvey’s *On Animal Generation* and John Hunter’s *Treatise on the Blood* to affirm that “Blake ... believed life not to depend on organization but rather to be a property of the globules of blood themselves” (202). He proposes a vitalism “not dependent upon a dualist metaphysics” (203). He casts his net wide in this chapter, examining the opinions of a variety of near contemporaries of Blake’s, including La Mettrie, Pierre-Louis de Maupertuis, Diderot, John Needham, Georges-Louis Leclerc (comte de Buffon)—as translated by J. S. Barr in 1792—and Erasmus Darwin’s *Zoonomia* in the areas of vitalism and panpsychism and their relationship. Most of these figures, however, are (or would be) unsatisfactory to Blake because they either posit “a remote, deistic God” or “were explicitly atheistic” (219). It’s worth noting that Fletcher argues that the Urizen books dramatize debates among many of these figures as well. He asserts, most importantly, that “Blake does not want a double vision, but rather a monist one: there is no spiritual world”; Blake instead “conveys the flat ontology of his divine material monism” (225). Flat ontology is the assertion that all beings exist equally: there are no gradations in “beingness,” even though beings have different degrees of influence in the

world. The trajectory of the Urizen cycle, Fletcher argues in the book’s final section, “Coda: The Ghost of Pantheism,” mutes Blake’s monist materialism to the point that it is “eventually abandoned by the end of the Urizen cycle” (229). If at any time Fletcher has sounded contradictory in some readings of Blake, it’s often because he’s describing a transformation of philosophical commitments over the course of these works.

- 8 From this point, I’m going to address some shortcomings in Fletcher’s argument that illuminate the general work that needs to be done when literary works are used to establish an author’s scientific or philosophical position. In chapter 1, he settles on specific positions implied or asserted by Blake’s tractates. He also asserts, however, that in *There is No Natural Religion* Blake is not “interested in constructing unassailable propositional proofs. Rather, Blake uses numbered premises and philosophical subheadings for satirical effect” (39). This claim seems to undo his argument: if Blake is writing satire, what is left of Fletcher’s claims about Blake, which are dependent upon readings of Blake that take him at face value? He says that the tractates “point to a metaphysical system and an intellectual tradition that other philosophers have elaborated in more rational detail” (39), but he doesn’t incorporate satirical intent into his close readings of Blake to arrive at this conclusion. How do we account for Blake’s satire, then? I believe that this facet of Fletcher’s argument reflects the primary inherent difficulty of ascribing a scientific position to an author based on a literary work: scientific language requires specificity, ideally to the point of one term having one and only one meaning in any context. Literary works are more often the opposite, capitalizing on polysemy and the playfulness and misdirection of genres such as satire. Fletcher attempts to derive a natural philosophy from a satirical work. He may have set himself an impossible task, so he cannot be faulted for failing in this attempt. I think he could only be successful if the point of Blake’s satire was to support a different natural philosophy.
- 9 Problems also arise in chapter 2, as Fletcher navigates through his material figure by figure, attempting to locate Blake’s position in relationship to each. The philosophic and early scientific texts that Fletcher engages are extended, usually focused discussions of their subject. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, on the other hand, collects poetry, aphorisms, and apocryphal narrative in a diffuse discussion of a number of subjects, some of which represent the points of view of different characters. Blake’s marginalia, also quoted in this chapter, comprise short, direct comments, written at the moment of his reading, in response to different texts. Blake never works out a coherent position about any of the topics engaged in this chapter through an extended, systematic discussion, as Fletcher acknowledges

himself. As a result, interpretations of Blake are consistently plagued with multiple possibilities, a common and even desirable feature of literary texts, but not a feature suitable for clearly establishing a single scientific position. Fletcher presents a number of plausible, intriguing readings, but I'm unsure why a reader would accept his readings over others.

- 10 For example, he points to the marriage of angel and devil at the end of *Marriage* as well as the text's assertion that man has "no Body distinct from his Soul" as signs of Blake's monism. But by associating Blake both with hylomorphism and with pantheism, especially Spinoza's pantheism, he seems caught in a dilemma: it's not clear how a view of an essentially *compound* nature can be reconciled with a view of nature as different modalities of a *single* substance. The two might be reconcilable, but Fletcher doesn't do this work. Furthermore, the belief that there is no body distinct from the soul is an explicitly Catholic belief, and has been for centuries. The current catechism asserts, citing the 1312 Council of Vienne, that

the unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the "form" of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.¹

I'm not asserting that Blake was a Catholic, or that we should prefer Catholic readings of Blake to others, but that the Catholic Church uses almost the same language without holding to Spinoza's monism. Aquinas was Aristotelian and assumed hylomorphism, but he probably would have been appalled at Spinoza. The problem here is not that we ought to choose one reading or another, but that Blake's language can be taken more than one way, and Fletcher can't give us a reason to choose between these irreconcilable readings—which we must if we're going to make claims about Blake's own natural philosophy.

- 11 An additional difficulty is posed by the word "pantheism" itself, a term whose definition was subject to debate during Blake's lifetime. It's not just that Fletcher's reading of Blake is one of several possible readings, but so is his reading of Spinoza. For example, Schelling's 1809 *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom and Related Matters*² includes an extended discussion of Spinoza that considers a variety of definitions of pantheism. He begins

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., #365 <<http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p1s2c1p6.htm#II>>.

2. All quotations of Schelling are from Ernst Behler, ed., *Philosophy of German Idealism: Fichte, Jacobi, and Schelling*, The German Library, vol. 23 (New York: Continuum, 1987).

with three: 1) the "immanence of things in God"; 2) "complete identification of God with all things" (222); and 3) a modification of the second definition that in Spinoza's philosophy "the individual object is equal to God" (223). Schelling then goes on to consider pantheism as relating to substance and pantheism as relating to will, an idea that briefly comes up near the end of Fletcher's book in relationship to Maupertuis and Leibniz (Fletcher 207). Without going into further detail, while Schelling departs from Spinoza on some points, he believes that all three of these definitions of pantheism represent misunderstandings of Spinoza. The important idea here is not a preference for one reading of Spinoza over another, but the need to address these different possible readings. Even though Blake certainly did not read Schelling, especially this specific text, during the period under consideration by the book, Fletcher does consider other authors Blake very likely didn't read to establish a milieu, and Schelling represents readings of Spinoza contemporary with Blake's lifetime.

- 12 I don't believe that I have invalidated Fletcher's thesis, just that additional work needs to be done before he can be said to have supported his argument. A defense of pantheism in Blake is key to Fletcher's claims, as this interpretation appears early in the book, where he refers to Blake's annotations to Lavater: "It is the God in *all* that is our companion & friend. ... Every thing on earth is the word of God & in its essence is God" (6). Fletcher emphasizes in this passage that "Blake's stress of '*all*' and 'Every thing' implies a flat ontology whose essence he claims is divinity" (6). However, during this period, it was possible to embrace a flat ontology in which human beings are "instead *among* beings, *entangled* in beings, and *implicated* in other beings" (6, quoting Levi Bryant) without embracing pantheism. Flat ontology in Bryant's (and Fletcher's) terms conforms to Romantic/organic philosophies as opposed to Newtonian/mechanistic philosophies with or without the support of pantheism. Fletcher's reading of Blake as pantheist forms a substantial basis for the early chapters of his book, but it isn't sufficiently defended against other possible readings. The essay by Schelling that I mention above directly addresses different ideas that could be implied by the phrase "in ... essence ... God," some of which do not support pantheism in Fletcher's sense. Because Fletcher's argument consists of an elaboration of *Blake's* beliefs in the area of *natural philosophy*, any one claim about this topic necessarily excludes other readings rather than stands alongside them. Fletcher's type of argument should reduce polysemy as much as possible. In the process, he should consider alternate readings to dispense with them, especially for such a key concept.

- 13 Eliminating polysemy to establish a scientific or philosophical position requires special care and attention, especially

when the text itself relies on simultaneously active multiple meanings of even individual words to achieve its literary effect. When discussing the Urizen books, Fletcher is careful to say that his readings do not “discount readings of the Urizen poems as instances of Blake’s grotesque satire of the biblical and Miltonic accounts of Genesis” (181). Since Blake wasn’t writing scientific or philosophical tracts, Fletcher’s work involves isolating scientific and philosophical positions in texts focused on other areas. As he says, “This chapter brackets the scriptural, political and Miltonic approaches to the Urizen poems in order to emphasize their relation to natural-philosophic discussions” (182). That is always the work that books like this must do. However, polysemy needs to be reduced or eliminated in relationship to this emphasis by carefully identifying a variety of scientific and philosophic positions possible and presenting an argument that eliminates all rivals as far as possible. While Fletcher does consider a number of different natural-philosophic positions, his usual strategy is to quote Blake, assert a reading, and then align Blake with a position, but not to quote Blake and then develop an argument for one reading of Blake over another in the area of natural philosophy. He makes similar errors in his reading of scriptural material, saying that Darwin’s conclusions are “anti-biblical [and] proto-evolutionary” (215), but scripture itself is also subject to numerous conflicting interpretations from the points of view of different traditions. Perhaps Blake is critical of Anglican theology but more closely aligned with Catholic? I believe that argument can be made in relationship to the Bible itself. Fletcher asserts that “we should not equate the Eternals with Blake’s perspective, as I do the Devil” (186), which establishes a position late in the book, but again, he doesn’t present an argument to support this reading. Blake’s position is very likely that of all the Eternals combined, Urizen included, in an unfallen state. If Blake’s perspective is on the side of the devils in *Marriage*, why is the marriage with the angel necessary?

14 I think I have learned that scholarship establishing an author’s scientific or philosophical positions from literary works has to accomplish the following tasks:

1. Account for genre;
2. Eliminate polysemy as far as possible in the area under inquiry;
3. Establish authorial position in relationship to the text, supported with evidence.

I don’t believe that Fletcher fully performed those tasks, but I don’t believe that shortcoming invalidates his readings either. I just believe that more work needs to be carried out in order to fully support them.