

Insight into Walt Whitman`s mind

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Abstract

Walt Whitman asserts that the world is but a dim version of higher spiritual realm. The transcendent is eternal; this world is subject to change and would perhaps eventually pass away. The world of the spirit is absolute, exists for its own sake. This world is subordinate; in itself it is of no importance, but exists for the sake of its spiritual meanings: "...the purpose and essence of the known life, the transient, / Is to form and decide identity for the unknown life, the permanent."

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1. Introduction

Human beings are born with spiritual needs that can be fulfilled by the soul's participation in the attributes of divinity. God, in His immanent nature, incarnates these attributes of Himself in nature and history. Walt Whitman asserts that the world is but a dim version of higher spiritual realm. The transcendent is eternal; this world is subject to change and would perhaps eventually pass away. The world of the spirit is absolute, exists for its own sake. This world is subordinate; in itself it is of no importance, but exists for the sake of its spiritual meanings: "...the purpose and essence of the known life, the transient, / Is to form and decide identity for the unknown life, the permanent ^[1]."

Whitman, the grandchild of the Enlightenment and the eldest son of American Transcendentalism, with full rights of primogeniture to the radical ideas which proceeded from the fusion of liberal Protestantism and Anglo-Americanism, prepares the way for a new religion and God. However Whitman finds it very difficult to define God as He is easily perceptible and at the same time eludes all descriptions and understandings. Whitman presents God both as immanent and transcendent. God is the creator of the world who remains distinct from and superior to it; on the other hand, God is immanently present in the world sustaining the creation and reveals divine attributes through it. God's immanent nature performs two functions: it upholds the material universe, imbuing all of nature and humanity with a spiritual essence and it impels nature and history to ever higher levels of perfection as it works its way upward to its transcendent source. Nature and history are ultimately significant for their spiritual meanings; and human existence is a period in which the soul discovers God's presence in this world and thereby prepares itself for an afterlife in which it will know God more fully ^[2].

Whitman's genius springs from the trick of recognizing connection in the apparently disconnected. One who looks hard enough for the central message of *Leaves of Grass* will find at last that beyond Whitman's deftly presented particulars, there is a universal or eternal being which gives them their existence. No object, no person, in the poem is to be looked upon as representative merely of that individuality in which it is presented. Whitman's objects and events are in a profound sense to be taken as nothing more than reminders of an eternal ground of being in which they are all united: "A vast similitude interlocks all...hold and enclose them" (Whitman, 261). It would be easy to attribute Whitman's perception of this important Unifier to

what so many of his interpreters have called His mysticism:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth, and I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own, and that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers, and that a kelson of the creation is love... (Whitman, 33).

It is imperative to turn more to determinism for insight into Whitman's mind and meaning of the First Cause, the indefinable God. Let us consider an idea developed by Spinoza, who stands perhaps greatest and grandest among the determinists. Spinoza calls the supreme nature of things the universal 'Substance' of the entire world. This 'Substance' makes us what we are; it does what its own nature determines. It is not produced but it produces. It is uncreated, supreme, overruling, omnipresent, absolute, rational, irreversible, unchangeable, the law of laws and the nature of natures. We with all our acts, thoughts, feelings, life, relations, experiences are just the result of it. This substance is what Spinoza calls God ^[3]. Whitman could have been referring to Spinoza when he remarked to Traubel, "...there is a philosophy somewhere-oh! What is his name? let me see...anyhow, a wise fellow asserted something to the effect - I cannot give you his words - that the Lord is no concrete personage, but the essence - the idea back of ideas- through which conditions, events as they were, were justified ^[4]." Whitman expresses the conviction that "the unseen soul govern(s) absolutely at last ^[5]." Whitman's unseen soul, general soul and Santa Spirita are equivalent to Spinoza's substance. This substance is the great connector.

Sufficient contemplation of causation leads us finally to the conclusion that there is something beyond causation, something of which causation itself is an effect. As Hume points out, all we know of causation is that it entails invariability of sequence; that is, a particular kind of event is invariably followed by another particular kind of event. We can never detect anything in the 'cause' which necessitates the 'effect'. We formulate natural laws which state, 'If this happens, then that will happen', but in doing so we have not explained why if this happens then that will happen. We merely know that, given the first event, the second event will occur. We do not know why the second event occurs. The laws of nature do not compel things to act in a certain way; these laws are the expression of the

spontaneous activity of things. They do not explain why things behave but simply state in a general formula how they behave. They do not solve the riddle but Whitman calls it as 'Haply God's riddle'. We are driven at last to the conclusion that there is something, beyond the causal sequence, which maintains the constancy of the causal sequence. Whitman calls it as the 'real of real' and the 'idea back of ideas' (Whitman, 477).

In Hindu philosophy one theory maintains that 'the causal operation is itself is an effect'. Professor Ewing speaks of "Kant's conviction that the rational and the real ground of the causal connection always belongs to the noumenal sphere and is for this very reason unknowable^[6]." Inge rejects 'the notion that one event is the cause of another. The cause of any event is the will of a spiritual being, of a mind which has willed it to happen in a certain series^[7]'. Rashdall says 'that even in mechanical action the real and ultimate cause of the event is not the previous event or any mysterious necessity of thought which requires that like physical antecedents should have like physical consequents, but the will of God which within the region of Mechanics works invariably according to this law of uniform succession^[8]'. Charles Bray in his book *The Philosophy of Necessity* concludes that "...God, therefore, must not be considered as only the first of a series of causes, but as the all-pervading influence which maintains the connection between all antecedents and consequents^[9]." Leibniz believes that the bond that exists between the cause and effect is the universal bond. This universal bond is God which unites all things in essence and thus all are one. Einstein with his great formula about energy and mass agrees that there must be something beyond the energy. Whitman also believes that great connector of everything is God. He says "... I do not know what it is – but I know it is in me... O Thou transcendent, Nameless..." (Whitman, 88, 419).

In "On the Beach at Night" Whitman has the father telling his weeping child, "Something there is more immortal even than the stars" (Whitman, 259). This mysterious 'something' figured prominently in Albert Einstein's religious outlook. He expressed his poignant awareness of it as follows:

To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms – this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness^[10].

God has been named by ten thousand names such as Varuna, Yaweh, Aton, Re, T'ien, Brahma, Zeus, Allah, God etc. and worshipped in a thousand different ways since man became man. The Idea, the Unconditioned, the Logos, the Absolute, the Substance- these have been efforts to describe it. Lao Tze called it Tao: "The Tao that can be told of / Is not the Absolute Tao; / The names that can be given / Are not Absolute Names^[11]."

Thus one might ask what is the explanation of the Tao? The definition of Tao has baffled everyone because Tao is itself indefinable. Hence some men have called it God; some have called it the Word or the Way; some have spoken of it as the Logos or Brahman. In effect, it is the Cosmic Impulse, the Primary Cause from which all emanates and toward which all strive.

Father of All! in every Age,
In ev'ry Clime ador'd
By Saint, by Savage, and by Sage,
Jehovah, Jove, or Lord!
Thou Great First Cause, least understood^[12]....

Thus does Pope pay homage to it in "The Universal Prayer." Whitman marvels in "A Riddle Song" how "the bright lambent flames of it, in every age and land, have drawn men's eyes..." (Whitman, 477). Pope gives us the answer to Whitman's riddle: Great First Cause. The First Cause as soon as it is uttered, it is profaned. In Bhagavad Gita the First Cause is described as indefinable, unshown, everywhere present, and inconceivable. It is spoken of in the Upanishads as 'neti, neti'- which means 'not this, not that'. It is not simple consciousness nor is It unconsciousness. Its unperceived, unrelated, incomprehensible, uninferable, unthinkable, and indescribable. Shri Ramakrishna worshiped it as Kali, 'the Mother of the Universe':

O Kali, my Mother full of Bliss... Eternal One! Thou great First Cause (my italics) clothed in the form of the Void!... Thou art the Mover of all that move, and we are but thy helpless toys; we move alone as Thou movest us and speak as through us thou speakest^[13].

Shelley had it in mind when he wrote *Queen Mab*: "Spirit of Nature! All-sufficing power, / Necessity! thou mother of the World^[14]!"

Herbert Spencer, English philosopher born a year later than Whitman, recognizes it as "infinite and Eternal Energy, from which all things proceed^[15]." The scenes of the universe are continually shifting but the power or force which actuates the whole machine is entirely concealed from us. Whitman uses 'power' and 'force' as unseen yet holds the universe with all its parts as one. This indefinable 'power' and 'force' is God.

Whitman believes that the discoveries of modern science are not an obstacle to faith but the basis for a more lofty understanding of God's wisdom and power. He differs from the deists, however, in that this scientific understanding incorporates early the nineteenth-century evolutionary theory and his epistemology insists that empirical fact is subordinate to mystical truth. Whitman depicts a universe, carefully designed by an intelligent and loving God.

Leaves of Grass is more accurately viewed as presenting a new religion for the American people that embraces modern science, especially the nineteenth-century evolutionary thought that emphasizes personal religious experiences and spiritual development. The poem either implies or explicitly asserts the basic ideas of Whitman's evolutionary religious cosmology and millennialist faith. Its central religious tenet is that the universe is the creation of a loving and transcendent God who is also immanently present in the evolution of nature and the progressive course of history. According to this worldview, all the facts of nature and history are religious symbols, expressive of divine immanence, and contributing elements in a divinely ordained cosmic movement towards perfection. Furthermore, since human beings are infused with this immanent divinity, their basic instincts and longings (including sexual impulses) are divine, and human beings can perfect themselves in this life by freeing themselves of all impediments to spiritual growth. And since this

immanent divinity is impelled with the instinct to return to its transcendent source, then after its human existence, the soul continues to attain increasingly higher levels of participation in divine transcendence.

Whitman presents a God who is indefinable yet actively present at the back of everything. God is near and distant at the same time. All the possible descriptions are inadequate to express exclusively and exhaustively the concept of God. Whitman's God is immanent, divine and transcendent. It is nameless, centre of everything, spiritual fountain, called by thousand other names and worshipped in different ways. Whitman could 'hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least'. Thus *Leaves of Grass*, the masterpiece of Whitman, contains a divine spark which unfolds the concept of the indefinable God as we scan his verses and weigh his thoughts.

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