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The Eternal Progression Argument against Mormonism

Abstract

This paper argues that Mormon cosmology plus the Mormon view of the origin of human persons results in an undercutting defeater for Mormonism. The approach is modeled after Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism. The first step is to show that Mormon cosmology is relevantly like naturalism. The second step is to show that the origin of human persons is relevantly similar to naturalistic evolution so that it faces the same kind of defeaters as the conjunction of naturalism and naturalistic evolution.

Keywords

Epistemology, Mormonism, Apologetics

Cover Page Footnote

Pursing PhD in Theology from LUBTS

INTRODUCTION

Alvin Plantinga has argued that “the conjunction of naturalism with the belief that we human beings have evolved in conformity with current evolutionary doctrine... is in a certain way self-defeating or self-referentially incoherent.”¹ The reason has to do with the origin of our cognitive faculties. If their origin is the unguided process of evolution by natural selection, then either we have no reason to think (or we have positive reason against thinking) that such faculties would produce reliably true beliefs. Natural selection, after all, does not care about whether a belief is true, but only whether some *behavior* is adaptive. Naturalism, which Plantinga takes to be the view that there is no one like the monotheistic God of Christianity, guarantees that there is no agent who either directly confers reliable cognitive faculties or indirectly applies them by guiding the evolutionary process. The only thing relevant to the formation of our cognitive faculties is just pure, unguided evolution by natural selection, a process which has no preference for producing true beliefs. The result is that we cannot rationally believe in naturalism and evolution at the same time; belief in evolution undercuts belief in naturalism.

Mormonism might face the same kind of undercutting problem as naturalism plus evolution for the same kinds of reasons.² In order to see why, we’ll first have to get the basic Mormon view of reality on the table.

THE MORMON WORLDVIEW

*The Primordial Realm*³

The Mormon view is that all that exists is matter, of which there are two kinds: “rough,” visible matter, and “fine,” invisible matter. Sterling McMurrin, a Mormon philosopher, argues that Joseph Smith’s view of reality is “essentially pluralistic and materialistic.”⁴ McMurrin adds that, according to the Mormon perspective, “there is no immaterial substance and... spiritual entities are not less material than physical objects.”⁵ The Doctrine and Covenants also says, “There is

¹ Alvin Plantinga, "The Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism," in *Naturalism Defeated? : Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism*, ed. James K. Beilby (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2002), 2.

² Though there are a number of ways to argue against Mormonism, an epistemic approach deserves special consideration. Many Mormons will appeal to a “burning in the bosom” as the primary way of determining truth. Some may even appeal to something like the *sensus divinitatis* to ground their belief. The argument here shows that these epistemologies are off limits to Mormons.

³ Outline of Mormon Cosmology modified from Jim Adams, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph Smith?," in *The New Mormon Challenge : Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

⁴ Sterling McMurrin as cited by J. P. Moreland, "The Absurdities of Mormon Materialism," in *The New Mormon Challenge : Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 244.

⁵ *Ibid.*

no such thing as immaterial matter [i.e., immaterial substance]. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes. We cannot see it, but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter.”⁶ Further, Joseph Smith affirmed that matter itself was eternal, uncreated, and indestructible.⁷

The implications of this kind of materialism have not often been explored by LDS thinkers. But Orson Pratt, who was one of the original twelve apostles of the church, gave an account how Mormon materialism might go. Though some of his work is considered heterodox, he gives one of the fullest philosophical explanations of Mormonism. Pratt’s ontology is critical to understanding “his theological/philosophical anthropology,” and so it is critical to a view of Mormon epistemology.⁸ In an essay titled, “The Absurdities of Immaterialism,” Pratt outlines his view. For Pratt, “to exist is to be located in absolute space and time.”⁹ Being solid is to have “either existence itself or at least something associated with existence.”¹⁰ Especially relevant to epistemological concerns is Pratt’s view of the mind. He takes the mind to be material thing, but not equivalent to the brain or any operation of the brain. Instead, the material mind “possessing the power to think, to feel, to reason, to remember [i.e., the cognitive faculties]...is the being that inhabits it, that preserves its own identity, whether in the body or out of it.”¹¹ The material mind is spatially located within a body by filling the body, which is very “porous.”¹² In other words, the material mind is physically connected to the body. Presumably, the mind controls the body through physical means.

The movements and nature of matter are governed by eternal laws. On Christian theism, God decrees the laws. However, Joseph Smith mentioned that there are “laws of eternal and self-existent principles” according to which man is able to achieve salvation.¹³ Being “self-existent,” they could not have been decreed by God. Former church President Ezra Taft Benson asserted, “Eternal laws exist universally. They are present alike in the spiritual as well as in the physical world. These priceless, fundamental principles and values never change.”¹⁴ Joseph Fielding Smith, another former president, wrote, “The Lord works in accordance with natural law.”¹⁵

⁶ D&C 131:7-8.

⁷ See David Grant, “Matter,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 868.

⁸ Moreland, 246.

⁹ Moreland, 246.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Orson Pratt, “Absurdities of Immaterialism,” in *The Essential Orson Pratt*, ed. David J. Whittaker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 67.

¹² *Ibid.*, 70.

¹³ Joseph Smith and Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 181.

¹⁴ Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1988), 116.

¹⁵ Adams, 183.

Besides law and matter, Joseph Smith further taught that “intelligence” was self-existent and uncreated:

We say that God himself is a self-existent being...It is correct enough; but how did it get into your heads? Who told you that man did not exist in like manner on the same principles? Man does exist upon the *same principles*...The mind or intelligence which man possesses is co-equal [i.e., co-eternal] with God himself...There never was a time when there were not spirits; for they are co-equal [co-eternal] with our Father in heaven...Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age, and there is no creation about it...The first principles of man are self-existent with God.¹⁶

In this short statement, Smith apparently confirms that at least three things are self-existent: God, intelligence, and “the first principles of man,” which are the same principles that apply to God. However, we learn elsewhere from Smith that God is of the same species as man. God is an intelligence, just as man is an intelligence. Joseph Smith, in the King Follett Discourse, said,

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and ... God ... (were) to make himself visible ... if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form -- like yourselves in all the person, image, and the very form as a man.”¹⁷

According to Joseph Smith, “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s.”¹⁸ He is a “personal Being... and exalted, perfected, and glorified *Man* of Holiness and *not a spirit* that fills the immensity of space.”¹⁹ Therefore, it is not the case that God existed as God from all eternity. Instead, at some point in the past, he was a bare intelligence, just as man, at some point in his past, was a bare intelligence. The significance of this is that God does not have special status over the laws which are eternally self-existent. He exists upon the same principles as man.

Truth and Intelligence

The nature of “intelligence” is critical to the LDS view of truth and the overall epistemic situation of Mormonism. The nature of intelligence and truth are tightly connected in Mormon thought. Joseph Smith said,

¹⁶ Joseph Smith, “The King Follett Sermon,” *Ensign* (April 1971).

¹⁷ Smith and Smith, 345.

¹⁸ D&C 130:22a.

¹⁹ Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City,: Bookcraft, 1966), 417.

Ye were also in the beginning with the Father; that which is Spirit, even the Spirit of truth; And truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come...Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.²⁰

Smith's definition of truth is unusual and this has not gone unnoticed by Mormon scholars. Truth as knowledge makes truth mind-dependent in a significant way. If there is some feature of the world which is unknown to any mind, we could not say anything true about it; there would be no fact of the matter.

B. H. Roberts (former member of the First Council of the Seventy), Bruce R. McConkie (former member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles), and others want to avoid the mind-dependent conception of truth and the obvious concerns it raises. Roberts understand Smith as teaching there was a truth relative to a particular individual and there is also absolute truth. Roberts thinks Smith's definition of truth as knowledge is just a definition of relative truth, which Roberts takes to be according "to each individual, knowledge of things as they are and as they were, and as they are to become, will be to him the truth and the fullness thereof, though not necessarily all the truth that is. This will be each man's truth, or relative truth."²¹ However, Roberts thinks that implicit in Smith's definition is a concept of absolute truth. There is a way things really are and a way things some individual takes them to be; these are not necessarily the same. In this way, absolute truth is not knowledge of things as they are, were, and will be, but just things as they are, were, and will be. Importantly, truth is not correspondence with reality, truth just is reality itself in Robert's view.

By describing intelligence as "the light of truth," Smith seems to make a necessary connection between truth and intelligence so that as light is the natural and necessary result of the sun, so intelligence is the natural and necessary result of truth. With Roberts' absolute, mind-independent conception of truth, he is able to make sense out this connection: intelligence is "the power by which truth is cognized and absorbed, and which he holds forth as Eternal, uncreated and uncreatable, therefore Eternal as truth itself—a parallel existence with Truth: Intelligence—Truth!"²² So, according to Roberts, so long as there is anything at all in the world (so long as there is truth), there must necessarily be some intelligence to perceive it. And, so Roberts says, by definition intelligences must possess at least a basic suite of cognitive faculties. What else could we mean by intelligence unless we mean it is a thing with at least some cognitive powers?

But Roberts' solution to the problem of relativism points to deeper problems with Smith's description of intelligence as "the light of truth." In particular, we want to know how there could be a necessary connection between truth and

²⁰ D&C 93:33-34.

²¹ B. H. Roberts and John W. Welch, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, 2nd ed., B.Y.U. Studies Monographs (Provo, Utah: B.Y.U. Studies, 1996), 56.

²² Roberts and Welch, 57.

intelligence and why there should be any truth around at all. Orson Pratt goes some way toward providing an answer, although his view at this point is not orthodox. He has a monistic picture in which God is Truth and God is the whole of reality. He cashes out his view this way:

As God is Light and Truth, and Light and Truth is God, all the characteristics which belong to one, belong to the other also. An infinite number of tabernacles [i.e., persons] filled with Truth, contains no more than one filled with the same: so likewise an infinite number of tabernacles filled with God knows no more than one knows. Truth is one Truth though dwelling in millions, so likewise God is one God though dwelling in countless numbers of tabernacles.²³

Pratt's monism provides a plausible solution to the apparent absolute/relative problem created by Smith's definition of truth as knowledge: "Truth is not a plurality of truths, because it dwells in plurality of persons, but it is one truth, indivisible, though it dwells in millions of persons... TRUTH is the God that dwells in them."²⁴ There is no gap between knowledge and truth for God. God just is the truth. And his panentheism might have access to better resources to explain why there is any truth at all. The trouble is that Joseph Smith was clearly not a monist, so the LDS church has officially condemned Pratt's view at this point.

Therefore, the best option is take Robert's view that truth is "the sum of existence," which takes intelligence as a necessary outcome as the "light of truth."²⁵

There is still the matter of what exactly intelligence is. The nature of "intelligence" is understood at least two different ways, each of which has important epistemological implications. According to Brigham Young and Parley and Orson Pratt, intelligence is a singular, undifferentiated thing. When a person is "organized," he is organized from this intelligence. Man did not exist eternally as an individual; part of the eternal "intelligence" became an individual at some point in the infinite past.²⁶ In this case, cognitive faculties are conferred upon individual through the natural process by which "intelligence" is organized into an individual.

B. H. Roberts (and probably Joseph Smith) thought that intelligences were eternal. Individual persons existed eternally as conscious, differentiated beings. This is the best understanding of what Smith recorded in the Book of Abraham: "Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones."²⁷ In this case, at least some of the cognitive faculties would exist in

²³ Orson Pratt, "The Pre-Existence of Man," *The Seer* 1, no. 1 (1853), 133.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁵ Roberts and Welch, 61.

²⁶ Blake Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 (1982), 63.

²⁷ Book of Abraham 3:22.

embryonic form along with the individual. B. H. Roberts gives this definition of intelligences:

They are uncreated; self-existent entities, necessarily self-conscious, and otherwise consciousness—they are conscious of the “me” and the “not me.” They possess powers of comparison and discrimination without which the term “intelligence” would be a solecism. They discern between evil and good; between good and better; they possess will or freedom—within certain limits at least. The power, among other powers, to determine upon a given course of conduct as against any other course of conduct. The individual intelligence can think his own thoughts, act wisely or foolishly; do right or wrong. To accredit an intelligence with fewer or less important powers than these would be to deny him intelligence altogether.²⁸

Since Robert’s view is the most orthodox, his will be what I take as normative for Mormonism. Also, it is significant the Roberts takes the cognitive faculties to exist *necessarily* (analytic necessity because to be an intelligence is, by definition, to possess at least some cognitive abilities. It is not the case that intelligences themselves exist necessarily), at least in their embryonic form.

God is Immanent within Universe and Subject to Eternal Laws

Here is the picture so far. There are three uncreated realities: intelligences, matter, and laws that govern intelligences and matter. God does not create this picture; he is a product of this picture. The intelligence we call “God” is person who, according to Joseph Smith, “finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory [other intelligences], because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws [laws for *his* kingdom, not laws in general] whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.”²⁹

Since according to Joseph Smith, “there is no such thing as immaterial matter” and there are eternal, self-existent laws that govern matter, it follows that God, and all other persons, being composed of matter, are subject to those laws. Parley Pratt, a leader in the early Mormon church and Orson Pratt’s younger brother, said that all beings, including the person we know as God, is “subject to the laws which govern, of necessity, even the most refined order of physical existence. All physical element, however embodied, quickened or refined, is subject to the general laws necessary to all existence.”³⁰ He added that these laws therefore “apply with equal force to the great, supreme, Eternal Father of the heavens and of the earth, and to his meanest subjects.”³¹ This shows that the universe and its relevant

²⁸ Roberts and Welch, 63.

²⁹ Smith and Smith. 354.

³⁰ Parley Pratt as cited in Jim Adams, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph Smith?,” 182.

³¹ *Ibid.*

laws are not determined by God nor are they ontologically dependent upon him. Instead, they are on “ontological par” with him.³² This led LDS philosopher David Paulsen to conclude, “God has always acted within a physical environment of uncreated mass-energy, a social environment of other selves, and within a framework of eternal laws and principles. These aspects of the world which are co-eternal with Him condition and limit Him.”³³

In light of this, Joseph Smith’s statement that God is an exalted man becomes clear. God, who is of the same species as man, achieved godhood by progression according to the self-existent, eternal laws of salvation. The progression from primal intelligence to organization within a spirit body (consisting only of matter), to organization within a body of flesh, to godhood is the process of exaltation, the eternal law of salvation. So, in principle, through obedience to the same laws, any man could achieve exaltation, or godhood. As Lorenzo Snow famously quipped, “As man is God once was, as God is man may be.”³⁴

Creation from Pre-Existent Matter

In his creation, God continues to be bound by natural law and the eternality of matter and intelligences. “Creation” is not *ex nihilo*, but is organization according to pre-existent law. Smith asserted that God used pre-existing matter to organize the world “out of chaos,” but “element [disorganized matter] had an existence from the time he had. The pure principles of element are principles which can never be destroyed; and they may be organized and reorganized, but not destroyed. They had no beginning, and can have no end.”³⁵

In the case of human beings, God apparently has even less direct control. Man is not created, but begotten. God, in relation to human beings on this planet, is understood to be of the same species as us, but just further along in his development. He is literally the father of our spirits; he did not create us. Rather, we were “born” according to natural laws and in his image, in the same way an earthly son is born in the image of his earthly father. Joseph Fielding Smith said, “All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity” and spirits (intelligences within a spirit body) are the “offspring of celestial parentage.”³⁶ The Mormon view is that the nature of God’s fatherhood God is exactly the same as physical, fleshly fatherhood. He also has the same amount of control over the way his offspring will be. They will

³² David Paulsen as cited in Jim Adams, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph Smith?,” 181.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See Gerald N. Lund, “Is President Lorenzo Snow’s oft-repeated statement - ‘As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be’ - accepted as official doctrine by the Church?” *Ensign* (February 1982), 38.

³⁵ B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Century I*, 6 vols., vol. 6 (Salt Lake City, Utah, : Deseret news press, 1930), 308-9

³⁶ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Man, His Origin and Destiny* (Salt Lake City, : Deseret Book, 1954), 351, 355.

be in his image, formed according to the natural process of celestial fatherhood. This is why celestial marriage is the “gateway” of exaltation. Gods have spirit children. In order to do that, they require a not only a Heavenly Father, but also a Heavenly Mother. Through their union, spirit children are begotten. McConkie confirms this idea: “An exalted and glorified Man of Holiness (Moses 6:57) could not be a Father unless a Woman of like glory, perfection, and holiness was associated with him as a Mother.”³⁷

Mormonism as Naturalism

Alvin Plantinga described naturalism as the “view that there is no such person as God, nor anything or anyone like him.”³⁸ He adds parenthetically: naturalism isn’t the view that “there are one or more finite gods.”³⁹ On the Mormon view, there certainly isn’t anything or anyone like the God of Christian theism that Plantinga has in mind. However, Mormonism might not be naturalism because it includes at least one finite god. But in the case of Mormonism this is just a semantic point. Gods are exalted men. There is no extra metaphysical category that “gods” go in. There are only intelligences, who are more or less exalted than other intelligences. Further these intelligences are subject to eternal, natural law as much as anything else. They are in no way transcendent of the universe; they are fixtures within the universe. For these reasons, Mormonism should be understood as a kind of naturalism.

THE ETERNAL PROGRESSION ARGUMENT AGAINST MORMONISM

Plantinga’s evolutionary argument against naturalism turns on the conjunction of naturalism with Darwinian evolution as the explanation of the diversity of all life “including ourselves and our cognitive systems.”⁴⁰ Plantinga then provides a number of possible explanations of how evolution might have produced our cognitive systems; each possibility turns out to be either inscrutable or provide positive reason to doubt the reliability of our cognitive faculties. Whether inscrutable or positive evidence against reliability, each case counts as a defeater for naturalism. Naturalism and Darwinian evolution, therefore, cannot be rationally held at the same time.

Mormonism faces a similar problem. The bottom floor of Mormon cosmology has three basic components: intelligences, laws, and matter. This looks relevantly like the kind of naturalism Plantinga has in mind. However, there is a significant difference between Mormonism and standard naturalism in terms of the origin of our cognitive faculties. On standard naturalism, the faculties themselves are a

³⁷ McConkie, 366.

³⁸ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 227.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴⁰ Plantinga, 228.

product of natural selection. The Mormon view is that cognitive systems exist as a necessary part of self-existent intelligences. So Mormonism is not subject to exactly the same argument Plantinga uses. However, we still need an account of the *reliability* of the cognitive faculties. We can therefore consider whether belief in Mormon cosmology is undercut by its explanation of the origin the *reliability* of our cognitive faculties. As best I can tell, there are only three possible accounts of the origin of the reliability of our cognitive faculties. Either reliability is eternal, it is progressive, or it is a consequence of being in the image of Heavenly Father.

Reliability is Eternal with Intelligence

The first option is to say that cognitive faculties are reliable eternally. The nature of intelligence somehow guarantees that not only do we have the power to cognize truth, but that power has always been reliable. This view has a number of disadvantages. There does not seem to be any principled reason to say that not only do intelligences possess cognitive faculties, but they are also reliable. Smith's statement that "intelligence is the light of truth" reveals a necessary connection between intelligence and truth, but it does not tell us the nature of that connection. That puts us in a neutral position; perhaps the cognitive faculties are reliable, perhaps not. But, being an intelligence does not guarantee reliability; it only guarantees the *power* to cognize truth. This view is, in principle, no different than the standard picture of naturalism. Any sufficiently sophisticated (i.e., it has cognitive faculties like perception, intuition, etc.) individual has the power to cognize truth. The mere fact of sophistication does not guarantee reliability. In fact, LDS thinkers make a similar point. Orson Pratt said, "The present qualities of our minds are not eternal, but are the results of the combinations of anterior qualities, which in their turn are again the results of the exercise of the eternal capacities."⁴¹ Since there is no principled reason to affirm our cognitive faculties are reliable, this option makes the status of them inscrutable for us. Holding this view would count as a defeater for Mormonism.

Reliability is the Consequence of Eternal Progression

A second option is that reliability is achieved once an intelligence has made sufficient progress according to the laws of salvation. The idea here is that at some point in the life of an intelligence, she crosses a "reliability threshold." After crossing the threshold, the cognitive faculties have been developed to the point that they produce more true than false beliefs. Thus any belief gained after crossing the threshold would be justified. This option is better than the first because it does not assume without reason that our cognitive faculties just are reliable. It is also apparently consistent with the idea of eternal progression. As we progress toward exaltation, presumably so does the reliability of our cognitive faculties.

⁴¹ Pratt, 114.

There are two troubles for this view. The first is that we could never be in a position to know that our cognitive faculties are reliable. What we need to be able to do is discern where we are in relation to eternal progress. If we cannot know whether or not cognitive faculties are reliable, we must be agnostic about their status. For Plantinga, agnosticism about reliability counts as a defeater. But making a judgment about whether we have crossed the threshold is no easy feat since progress is an endless and infinite process. Progression is “like the horizon one pursues over the ocean—ever receding as one approaches it.”⁴² In order to discern whether we’ve crossed the reliability threshold, we must assume our cognitive faculties are reliable (how else could we check whether we have crossed the threshold?). But to assume reliability in order to evaluate reliability is circular. Therefore, we cannot know whether our faculties are reliable or not; it is inscrutable for us.

The second trouble is that reliability as consequence of eternal progression might make the same kind of assumption as the first option. The concern is about how some intelligence can move from unreliable to reliable cognitive faculties. If reliability is a consequence of eternal progression, then one must be able to make progress in order to gain reliability. But, making progress requires sustained obedience to the eternal law. That kind of coherent, sustained action toward a particular end would plausibly require reliability to already be in place. So, in order to get eternal progression going, we must already possess reliable cognitive faculties. Therefore, this option faces the same problem as the first: there is no principled reason why intelligences eternally possess reliable cognitive faculties.

Here is another way of getting at the same problem: there is a gap between successfully knowing truth and eternal progression (and a gap between knowledge and intelligence). McConkie explains that:

Knowledge can be obtained and used in unrighteousness; Satan gains his power on this principle. But intelligence presupposes the wise and proper use of knowledge, a use that leads to righteousness and the ultimate attainment of exaltation. The devil has tremendous power and influence because of his knowledge, but he is entirely devoid of the least glimmering of intelligence. An intelligent person is one who applies his knowledge so as to progress in the things of the Spirit; he glories in righteousness.⁴³

The point is that the underlying assumption in this option, that reliability is necessarily related to progression, is false. Since “knowledge can be obtained and used in unrighteousness,” gaining knowledge can only be a necessary but not sufficient condition for making eternal progress. In other words, reliability cannot be the consequence of eternal progression; it is one of the requirements.

One objection might be that Heavenly Father can “jump start” reliability by the use of revelation or providence. Through these means, he can guide an

⁴² Roberts, 62.

⁴³ McConkie, 278.

intelligence across the reliability threshold. Though, the kind of intervention Heavenly Father is capable of will be severely limited compared to a theistic view. Heavenly Father cannot act outside of natural law; he cannot just make some intelligence more exalted because that would be a violation of the eternal, self-existent laws of salvation. Further, he is made only of matter. He is spatially located a particular time and place. And the intelligence he wants to jump start is in the same situation. Therefore, he can only operate as a stimulus external to an intelligence. The stimulus provided by Heavenly Father would still be interpreted by unreliable cognitive faculties and so it might still be impossible to get progression going. But the deeper problem is that Heavenly Father himself would have had to overcome the same difficulty. This creates an infinite regress. For this reason, the use of revelation or providence does not work out the second option. In light of this, the best case scenario for option two is that the status of our cognitive faculties is inscrutable for us.

Reliability is the Consequence of Being in Heavenly Father's Image

The third option is that our cognitive faculties are made reliable as the consequence of being in Heavenly Father's image. The basic idea is that when Heavenly Father "forms" us into a spirit body, he imparts to us reliable cognitive faculties. The argument runs like this:

- (1) Heavenly Father has reliable cognitive faculties.
- (2) Having reliable cognitive faculties is a divine attribute.
- (3) We are formed in Heavenly Father's image.
- (4) Being formed in Heavenly Father's image means we share in his divine attributes.
- (5) Therefore, we also have reliable cognitive faculties.

Let's set aside the infinite regress problem brought up the second option and grant (1). In support of (1) we could also say that reliably forming beliefs is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for eternal progress and exaltation. Heavenly Father is an exalted being; therefore, must have reliable cognitive faculties. On Mormonism, (3) and (4) are also true. Joseph Fielding Smith said that "Man is the child of God, formed *in the divine image* and *endowed with divine attributes*, and even as the infant son of an earthly father and mother is capable in due time of becoming a man, so the undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage is capable, by experience through ages and aeons, of evolving into a God."⁴⁴

One of the problems with this argument is found in premise (2). Having cognitive faculties is an attribute, but what makes it a divine attribute? Why is reliability in particular a divine attribute? This points to a more general, but deeper, problem. Since Heavenly Father is of the same species as us, we already share in all his essential attributes or properties. In that case, none of Heavenly Father's essential attributes could be uniquely divine. His essential attributes just

⁴⁴ Joseph Fielding Smith, 354-355. Emphasis mine.

are those attributes that every intelligence possesses by virtue of being an intelligence, the same way all humans have the same essential attributes just because they are human. Former President John Taylor makes this point especially clear: man “did not originate from a chaotic mass of matter, moving or inert” but when Heavenly Father formed man, man was already “possessing, in an embryotic state, all the faculties and powers of a God.”⁴⁵

In light of this, being formed “in his image” and being “endowed with divine attributes” could only refer to sharing in his accidental qualities, in the same way an earthly father might pass on his blue hair or brown eyes to his children. In the case of Heavenly Father’s forming of in his image, this seems to be similar to what the Mormon view is. Heavenly Father is an exalted, *embodied* man. For us to be made in his image is, quite literally, to be made physically like him. In fact, the Mormon view is that Heavenly Father, as the father of our spirits, has exactly the same relation to his offspring an earthly father does to his children. Brigham Young stated, “[God] created man, as we create our children; for there is no other process of creation in heaven, on the earth, in the earth, or under the earth, or in all the eternities, that is, that were, or that ever will be.”⁴⁶ B. H. Roberts said that “we are brought forth by the natural laws of procreation.”⁴⁷

This leaves us with two options: either reliability is an essential attribute or it is not. If it is essential, we already possess it since we are the same species as Heavenly Father. It is not conferred on us because we are his offspring. However, we have already seen that we are only warranted in believing that the cognitive faculties themselves are essential, and not reliability. This leaves us with one choice: reliability is an accidental property. But what warrant do we have for thinking that a specific accidental attribute is among those attributes we are endowed with when Heavenly Father “begets” us?

This raises a concern with (4). In order for the argument to be successful, (4) must be restated as

(4’) Being formed in Heavenly Father’s image means we share in *all* his divine attributes.

However, being made in the image of God cannot mean we take on all the attributes of God. It means that we become, by virtue of being given a spirit body, physically like him. The analogy given is that “As the horse, the ox, the sheep, and every living creature, including man, propagates its own species and perpetuates its own kind, so does God perpetuate his.”⁴⁸ Clearly, not all the accidental attributes are passed down from one generation to the next. We do not, for example, have the property of being exalted to the point of having spirit children. So (4’) cannot be right; we do not share in all Heavenly Father’s divine attributes.

⁴⁵ Taylor as cited in Jim Adams, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph Smith?,” 180.

⁴⁶ Brigham Young, George D. Watt, and J. V. Long, *Journal of Discourses*, 54 vols., vol. 11 (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1854), 122.

⁴⁷ B. H. Roberts, *The Gospel: An Exposition of Its First Principles, and Man’s Relationship to Deity*, 10th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1965), 280.

⁴⁸ President John Taylor as cited in McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 180.

One final possibility is

(4") Being formed in Heavenly Father's image means we share in at least his attribute of having reliable cognitive faculties.

However, I can see no principled reason available to support this premise. Therefore, reliability as the consequence of being made in the image of God is inscrutable for us.

CONCLUSION

I have shown that belief in Mormon cosmology is undercut by the Mormon explanation of the origin of reliable cognitive faculties. Of the three possible origins considered, all three are inscrutable for us. This means that the Mormon worldview cannot give us a reason to think our cognitive faculties are reliable. One application of this argument is that Mormons could not consistently appeal to a "burning in the bosom" as a reliable way of discovering truth. Burning bosoms are the result of a naturalistic process that is not aimed at truth so there is no reason to expect them to be truth conducive. Further, Mormons cannot consistently expect that God would be able to keep "Moroni's Promise," as recorded in the Book of Mormon. The prophet Moroni exhorts his reader to "ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost"(Moroni 10:4). However, given the Mormon worldview, we have no reason to expect that God or the Holy Ghost actually have the power required to manifest truth or that, even if he did, we would be able to recognize it as such. If all of this is right, it follows that consistent Mormons could never be Mormon for good reasons.

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