



Exploring Mormon Thought

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God's Plan to Heal Evil

Blake T. Ostler

EXPLORING MORMON THOUGHT:
GOD'S PLAN TO HEAL EVIL

Volume 4

Blake T. Ostler

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PREFACE

The problem of evil is perhaps the greatest challenge to belief in a loving and personal God. At least for those in the Abrahamic traditions—Christians, Jews, and Muslims—the existence of evil in the world is a major challenge to the acceptance of a God who both cares about us and is in some sense responsible for the way that the world is. The challenge naturally leads us to ask, “Why, God, has this happened to me, to my loved ones, to my enemies?” Or, to ask with the Psalmist, “Where art thou God?” Or, to perhaps echo Jesus, “My God, my God, why hast thou abandoned me?”

The problem with attempting to give an answer to these questions is that the only real answer we can give is that we just do not know. Lacking any clear revelation on the matter, we are left to struggle, to doubt, and to suffer through this challenge. Perhaps even worse, when we attempt to provide an answer, we often just end up justifying and even defending the evils that occur in the world.

I remember a woman standing to bear her testimony in our church meeting and thanking God that her son was not harmed in a recent car accident. Just two pews away sat the mother of another son who did not survive that same accident. I was spiritually embarrassed. The gratitude of the mother whose son survived was both real and understandable. However, the grief and additional thoughtless pain caused by this expression of thanksgiving struck me as remarkably insensitive and obtuse. But who was I to judge?

This book is the result of an existential struggle with my own commitments and experiences. My life has been remarkably blessed. But even remarkably blessed lives have challenges and heartaches, losses and kicks in the gut. Evil is not just pain and suffering, it is our own evil and the vile things

that we do to each other—and especially to those that we say we love the most. Sometimes humans are just truly and irrefutably evil. However, we do not need to look at others who are examples of true evil; the real revelation comes when we look at our own hearts. We have all done things that we are ashamed of and that in context are truly evil. We know it better than anyone.

This book delves into the problem from an analytic perspective that seeks to transcend mere analysis and make the problem both personal and existential. The cases of evil that I cite have been true struggles and challenges for me. My own experiences have forced me to my knees, where I have spent hours questioning, writhing in anguish, crying, begging, pleading, and imploring God for answers, insights, comfort, enlightenment, and solace.

The way I have approached the issue is not the only way to do so. It is just the most responsible way I know how to discuss it. Over the years, I have had many, many conversations with David Paulsen—an incredible Latter-day Saint philosopher and one of the greatest men I have encountered. We discussed the issues at length, and our conversations are often reflected in what we each wrote on the subject. This book is in many ways the fruit of those discussions. In particular, the agape theodicy reflected in this book is a result of hours of creative musings and assessments. However, I emphasize that any deficiencies in the theory are my own and not attributable to David.

I also discussed the issues related to the problem of evil with Truman Madsen. His book *Eternal Man* first introduced me to the fact that the restored gospel has a very unique and powerful perspective to put our experiences of evil into perspective. Truman was one of the most creative and entertaining thinkers I have spoken with. He would often just stop mid-discussion with some breakthrough or insight that got him excited to see it in a new way. I loved that about him.

I also discussed the issues at length with Sterling McMurrin. He did not approach the issue from a believing perspective. However, he took an interest and emphasized to me that he still had a sense of God even if he was an agnostic. I never figured out how one could hold that stance, but God's existence remained an existential question for him (even if he detested existentialism!). My assessment of finitist Mormon thought owes much to my discussions with Sterling.

But most of all, this book is the result of being a son, sibling, husband, father, and grandfather. What I have learned from the challenges and

PREFACE

blessings of the basic nuclear family astounds me. My father passed away last year, and I still find myself suddenly tearing up when I remember him, the things he did and said to me, and his personal idiosyncrasies that bring a smile to my face. The sense of loss is profound and at times overwhelming. The weight of mortality has fallen on me, and the promise of continued life after death has gained more meaning. Watching my mother and father take care of each other in their health challenges inspired me and taught me what it is to see real and lasting love.

I can never adequately put into words what I feel about my wife and children. They are everything to me. This poem that I wrote for my wife expresses the love that I have gained the capacity to know through them:

There are times when I wonder,
How it is we came to be,
At such times of wonder,
There is you and there is me,
But in the times we have together,
You and me have become we,
And over time this we has grown,
So that you and me are not just we two,
But now the time has come,
That we are all of our children too.
And at times tears come to my eyes,
At the wondrous image of loving embrace,
That includes all of the times we shared together,
Not just me and not just you,
But also all of these that are ours forever,
With whom we are no longer just you and me,
WE are everything that I ever wished to be.

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WHAT WE LEARN FROM THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

From a distance we all have enough,
and no one is in need.
And there are no guns, no bombs, and no disease,
no hungry mouths to feed . . .
From a distance there is harmony,
It's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves.
This is the song of every man.
And God is watching us, God is watching us,
God is watching us from a distance.
Oh, God is watching us, God is watching.
God is watching us from a distance.

—Julie Gold

I have always disliked the song “From a Distance” made popular by Bette Midler, where the evils of the world look like a pleasant cosmic harmony if one just backs up far enough and assesses it in the abstract. I dislike the notion that God is so aloof that He views us from a distance and doesn't notice the evils that confront us because everything is really just fine from His distance. Such a view is totally consonant with the view that God ordained virtually everything that occurs. Everything that we think is evil is really a part of the harmony and thus all for the best. There can be no logical problem of evil, because the observation that, for all we know, God may just have his reasons, shows that God may be justified in allowing whatever merely apparent evils occur.

I prefer the Christian notion that God did not stand aloof “at a distance” but participated directly with us in the mud and blood of human horror—up close and personal. It’s only when we get closer and look at particular instances of evil that the harmony disappears. If we take concrete instances of evil in all of their particularity, the notion that such evils can plausibly be explained by some abstract possibility of a greater harmony dissipates. It is in light of such concrete instances of evil that it becomes apparent that either our every attempt to explain how God could ordain them to produce some greater good is a complete failure, or our explanations themselves are morally abhorrent.

Radical Evils

There are a few instances of radical evil that I am going to focus on to address the problem of evil. Each is, terribly, too real. These events still rip the heart out of my chest every time I think about them.

1. In 1982, a three-year-old girl was kidnapped from a park in Utah. She was playing with her two brothers, ages five and one-and-a-half years old, as well as other children from the area. According to the witnesses, a twenty-five- to thirty-five-year-old male offered the little girl some gum. They last saw the perpetrator put her in a car and drive away. Twenty-four days later, her body was found with her hand tied behind her neck. The three-year-old had been brutalized before her death. This case remains unsolved.

2. My good friend had an eight-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter who had just returned from church. As they went out to play, a car in their neighbor’s driveway inexplicably began to roll backward. The brother saw that his sister was in the car’s path and rushed to try to stop it. Unable to save her, he watched the car roll over his little sister, crushing her head. My friend has since gone through a divorce from his wife, who was never able to get past the devastating events of that day. His son suffered psychological trauma from the incident and has been essentially nonfunctional since this tragedy.

3. Until its declared eradication on December 9, 1979, smallpox was the most virulent killer in the recorded history of the world. The advent of smallpox in the New World nearly wiped out existing Native

American populations, with several distinct tribes being completely decimated by the contagion. In Europe, near the end of the eighteenth century, the disease accounted for nearly four hundred thousand deaths each year, including five kings. Of those surviving, one-third were blinded. Between 20 and 60 percent of all those infected—and over 80 percent of infected children—died from the disease. During the twentieth century alone, it is estimated that smallpox caused the death of three hundred million to five hundred million people. Survivors were almost always left with severe disfiguring pox scars. Throughout human history, smallpox killed at least several billion people, vastly exceeding the combined total of deaths in all world wars.¹

These are instances of moral and natural radical evils. Radical evils are those that appear to us, for all that we can grasp, to be unjustifiable because they destroy the very humanity of the victims and have no fathomable good to which they are necessary. The three-year-old girl's death resulted presumably from the depraved free acts of moral evil. It is an instance of radical moral evil. My friend's daughter's death resulted from what appears to be sheer random happenstance of a confluence of fairly innocent negligence and inexplicable operation of natural laws that result in overwhelming trauma to those involved. It is an instance of a mix of mild human negligence and natural evils—those that result from the operation of natural laws. Smallpox is an instance of radical natural evil. All are radical evils because the immediate victims of these events cannot benefit from the experiences of evil and because their very dignity and personhood were destroyed by the events involved.²

1. Allsdaire M. Geddes, "The History of Smallpox," 152–57.

2. This kind of argument from particular evils owes much to William Rowe. See William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 335–41; William Rowe, "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra," 95–100; William Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," 262–85; William Rowe, "Skeptical Theism: A Response to Bergmann," 297–303; and William Rowe, "Friendly Atheism, Skeptical Theism, and the Problem of Evil," 79–92. See also Bruce Russell, "The Persistent Problem of Evil," 121–39; Bruce Russell, "Defenseless," 193–206; Bruce Russell, "The Problem of Evil: Why is there So Much Suffering?" 207–13; Bruce Russell and Stephen Wykstra, "The Inductive Argument from Evil: A Dialogue," 133–60; Paul Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," 331–50; and Paul Draper, "Probabilistic Arguments from Evil," 303–17.

The Problem of Evil: The Argument

Each of these radical evils is something that any decent person would prevent if possible. We cannot fathom how any of these events is necessary to the attainment of some greater good. It seems fairly obvious that the moral fabric of the universe would not be put at risk, the value of agency for humanity would not be destroyed, and the natural order of the universe and its laws would not be thrown into chaos if these events had been prevented from happening.

Do these events demonstrate that God is either not good or cannot exist? For purposes of this argument, “omnipotence” means roughly that there are no non-logical constraints on the exercise of divine power. An “omniscient” being is one who knows all truths. A “perfectly good” being is one who is essentially good in the sense that, if it were supposed to do something less than what is optimally good, it would either (a) not exist or (b) freely choose to cease to be divine. The argument goes as follows:

1. Necessarily, any being that is God is a perfect being.
2. Necessarily, a perfect being is omnipotent.
3. Necessarily, an omnipotent being could unilaterally prevent any instance of evil of which it is aware.
4. Necessarily, a perfect being is omniscient.
5. Necessarily, an omniscient being is aware of all events that have, are now, or will occur.
6. Necessarily, a perfect being is morally perfect.
7. Necessarily, a morally perfect being would prevent all evils that it could of which it is aware.
8. Therefore, if there is any evil in the world, then there is no perfect being. (From 1-7)
9. There is evil in the world.
10. Therefore, there is no perfect being. (From 8 and 9)
11. Therefore, there is no God. (From 1 and 10)

This argument is logically valid. However, it is not a logical proof that God cannot exist. It is merely a persuasive argument that, if all the premises are true, shows that God does not exist. Are the premises true? Those who believe in a deity with all power, all knowledge, and perfect goodness (which I shall call the “omni-god”) may question both premises 7 and 9. Premise 7 is false because a perfectly good being does not necessarily prevent all evils;

it needs only to prevent those evils that are not necessary for the realization of some greater good. Further, premise 9 is not logically necessary—it depends on the way the world is and, as such, is an empirical premise that must be demonstrated by evidence. Thus, premise 7 also is not necessarily true. Premise 9 is, at best, a value judgment that can only be assessed based on the evidence available to us coupled with a sound moral judgment. For all we know, all evils may be justified by some greater good. For example, a loving mother may justifiably subject her daughter to a series of very painful vaccination shots because the benefits of being protected from painful, crippling, or deadly illnesses outweigh the momentary pain. Thus, while there is some bad in experiencing the pain of receiving a vaccination, the pain is justified by the benefits of preventing diseases that are much worse.

If we take a step back and view the world from “a distance,” as the song suggests, we can ask whether all evils are like the pain of a vaccination and merely apparent evils. In itself such pain is bad, but given the great benefits of immunity against diseases that, if unvaccinated, could result in much greater pain and even death, and which cannot be obtained in any other way that is less painful, the vaccination is really good—all things considered. Of course, if there were no benefit from the painful shots (say we just stuck needles into little children for the fun of it), such actions would be an unjustifiable evil. Further, if we could obtain the same benefit with less pain (say by having the child swallow a sugar cube), we would be unjustified in inflicting the pain of multiple shots on the child. The good to be realized must be necessary for the benefit in the sense that it cannot be achieved in some less painful way and must be sufficient in its good effects to justify the pain.

What kinds of greater goods could justify allowing the radical evils I have outlined? To begin, the interests and consent of the victim are crucial to whether such events could be justified. For example, if a doctor decided to perform painful experiments that could result in long-lasting and undesirable side-effects on a patient without their consent in order to further the cause of science, we would view the doctor as a criminal. However, if the mature patient consented to the experiment after being fully informed of the pain and health risks, then the experimentation is sometimes justified—if the risks are not too great and the benefit to be achieved is considerable. Nevertheless, the patient is entitled to assess the risks and benefits for themselves. If the patient consents that the experimental operation is worth it, then we do not fault the physician if the operation does not turn out as

planned. It is a risk inherent in the experimental procedure that the patient freely chooses to confront.

Based on these considerations, among others,³ I suggest, just as Immanuel Kant asserts with his second formulation of the categorical imperative, that it is not appropriate to treat a person as a mere means and not also as an end in and of himself. Such dehumanizing treatment makes a person a mere thing—an object that is used to appropriate something that always had less value than any person.

I propose that there are at least three conditions that must be met for the “greater goods” to count as Justifying Goods (JG) in response to the argument from the problem of evil:

(JG) In order to constitute a Justifying Good, the benefit derived from allowing an evil must be such that (a) it outweighs the magnitude of the evil; (b) the evil is necessary to achieve the benefit in question; and (c) the evil furthers the interests of the victim—not merely as a means to achieve the benefit but also as a Thou—an intrinsically valuable person whose own interests are also furthered.⁴

Any evil that is not justified by some Justifying Good may be referred to as an Unjustified Evil (UE).

(UE) An Unjustified Evil is such that (a) its magnitude of dis-value outweighs the value of any possible good to which the evil is necessary to achieve; or (b) it is not necessary to realizing the value of any outweighing good; or (c) its occurrence cannot result in some benefit to the victim of the evil sufficient to justify its dehumanizing effects.

Note that these conditions are disjunctive in the sense that each is in itself sufficient to show that a suggested good is not truly justified. Demonstrating any one of these conditions in relation to some suggested Justifying Good is sufficient to undermine the justification of the supposed good. All three conditions need not be demonstrated. So the question for the problem of evil is whether there are any Unjustifiable Evils. If there are

3. I discussed the reasons for adopting the view that it is immoral to treat others as a mere means or objects in Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism and the Love of God*, ch. 1.

4. On experiencing other persons as a Thou, see Blake T. Ostler, *Fire on the Horizon: A Meditation on the Endowment and Love of Atonement* 7–11.

Unjustified Evils, then there are events occurring that, all things considered, would be better that they not occur.

Thus, the following premises of the argument must be adjusted to accommodate these requirements:

7*. Necessarily, a morally perfect being would prevent all *unjustified* evils that it could of which it is aware.

8*. Therefore, if there is any *unjustified* evil in the world, then there is no perfect being. (From 1-7)

9*. There is *unjustified* evil in the world.

The three instances of radical evils I discussed appear to meet the criteria of Unjustified Evils. The kidnapping, rape, and brutal murder of a little girl is an instance of a radical moral evil. It results from the supposedly free acts of an as yet unknown murderer. It seems impossible that the little girl herself could possibly benefit from these events because she did not survive. Allowing the murder does not appear to be necessary to the realization of any good of sufficient value that would justify this murder. It is true that freedom to act and the exercise of free will are valuable. However, the freedom of the girl's murderer to carry out this reprehensible murder is not of sufficient value to justify allowing him to exercise his freedom. For example, no one would fault any person who interfered with the freedom of the little girl's murderer to prevent him from carrying it out. While freedom is valuable, her murderer's freedom to carry out his reprehensible acts just does not count in the moral considerations we take into account to determine whether to allow such events to occur. Nor would we consider it appropriate to just stand by and watch as the murderer assaulted and killed her because it may give *us* the opportunity to become more compassionate. We would still judge it as obligatory to stop the murderer every time we could without risking harm to ourselves—even though we may ourselves derive some benefit from allowing it to happen.

If any one of us were present and had the capacity to stop this murder without risk of harm to ourselves, we would be obligated to stop it. The world is not a better place, as far as we can assess matters, because a three-year-old girl was murdered. Yet God was there and had the capacity to stop it without risk to Himself. He could have sent angels to overpower the murderer—like He stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac (Gen. 22:10–12) or like He stopped

Laman and Lemuel from beating Nephi to death (1 Ne. 3:28–29). He could have revealed to any adult around what was happening or the whereabouts of the murderer shortly after the kidnapping. If it is suggested that such obvious intervention would have made his existence obvious and obviated the need for faith, then it is easy to come up with other scenarios where there is no risk of rendering God's existence obvious. God could have stopped the entire series of events leading to her murder by causing the murderer to suffer an aneurysm or stroke—and no mortal would have even known of the intervention. He could have interfered with the function of the neurons in the murderer's brain to cause him to be repelled by the thought of kidnapping and murdering little girls. In fact, if God caused such desires, then the murderer is still free in a compatibilist sense of free will to choose to not murder even though his desires were immediately caused by God.⁵

It seems to me that unless we make God the exception to all moral rules that apply to us (such that everything we know about good and evil and moral obligation does not apply to God), then we must admit that there is nothing we know of that is both necessary and sufficiently good that it would justify God in not intervening in the ways I have suggested, among many others, to stop these events from occurring. The instances of natural evil and pointless evil that I have discussed are similar. We know of no good that has sufficient value that it is even plausible to suggest that allowing these events to occur is both necessary to the attainment of that good and also benefits the victims of these events. The death of my friend's little girl from a freak car accident could surely have been prevented by just making the brake catch or preventing it from starting to roll until just a few minutes later. Moreover, the accident could have been prevented by a man of usual strength who was present and observed what was occurring.

I submit that it is obvious on its face that the natural order of the universe would not be upset by divinely intervening to stop the car from starting to roll for just a few minutes. Nor is there any benefit to the little girl or her family that we can fathom from allowing her to be crushed by the car. Preventing this type of event is not necessary to prevent some greater good from obtaining. An omnipotent being who foreknew the dehumanizing and crushing effects of the little girl's death on her brother and parents cannot be justified in allowing an evil of this sort by referring to anything

5. Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God*, 202–13.

less than a very great good that cannot be accomplished in any other way than by allowing this particular event to occur.

I also submit that we know that preventing natural evils of great magnitude, such as smallpox and the black plague, did not throw our universe into chaos, truncate human moral freedom, or prevent anyone from developing valuable moral attributes through soul-building. If smallpox had been cured before the eighteenth century, either through a revelation of medical means or by divine fiat, no greater good would have been prevented. I submit that we are in a cognitive position to know that curing smallpox did not upset the natural order or prevent the world from functioning as a place where we can make important moral decisions in the face of real challenges necessary for our moral growth as persons.

So is the argument from evil a good argument? From the standpoint that it would be some justification for doubting the omni-god's existence, the argument is a resounding success. Remember that arguments are merely attempts at persuasion. The argument is logically valid as an evidential argument. The premises of the argument appear to us to be true for all we can assess. However, whether it is persuasive is a person-specific kind of assessment regarding whether, in fact, Unjustified Evils exist. Can a person reasonably believe that there are not any Unjustified Evils?

Human Cognitive Limitations

It seems to me that at least three observations must be admitted with respect to the challenge to God's existence from evil: (a) we cannot be expected to know what God's actual purposes in allowing these particular evils in fact are (absent particular revelation); (b) we are often not in a very good cognitive position to make decisions about "all things considered" judgments; and (c) God's glory and vast knowledge are such that His possible reasons for allowing particular events may very well be beyond our ability to grasp.

If we cannot make "all things considered" judgments, such as assessing all of the relevant variables of how changing an event would impact all of the interrelated concerns a divine being may have, then it is difficult to see how the argument from evil can be persuasive. Premise 9* must be shown by evidential or empirical considerations. However, as I believe my discussion demonstrates, premise 9* enjoys a good deal of *prima facie* credibility. Nevertheless, consideration of our cognitive limitations *vis-a-vis* God may

suggest that we simply are not in a position to judge. The argument requires us to assess whether there are plausible greater goods that are both necessary to attain the greater good and sufficient in value to justify God's allowing the kinds of evils that actually occur. However, assessing such greater goods requires us to assess what the effect would be of disallowing the radical evils for such concerns as human moral development, prospects to realize the value of free will, developing truly loving relationships through circumstances that call us to compassionate response, the effect on the natural order, what God's purposes for creation could be, and the possibility that God just may have His reasons that we cannot begin to fathom. Are we really in a cognitive position to assess such things—given all of the various variables at issue?

The Skeptical Theist (ST) answer to the problem of evil suggests that we are justified by considerations such as (a) through (c) above in concluding that:

(ST) Given our cognitive limitations, it is likely that if there were goods known to God that were necessary for a greater good, then it would be beyond our ability to either (a) grasp what they are; or (b) assess how it is necessary to allow the evils that actually occur in order to obtain these goods.

The analogy is often used that we stand in terms of cognitive capacities like a dog stands to its master. If I take my dog to a veterinarian for a worms shot, my dog may well feel that I have delivered him up to a stranger to inflict pain on him. My dog cannot begin to fathom the science of germ theory necessary to grasp why I would do such a thing. The analogy suggests that my dog can no more grasp why I would subject him to a shot to cure worms than I can grasp God's reason for allowing evil. There may be goods that we simply cannot begin to fathom, and God could not explain them to us because they are so far beyond our cognitive capacity to grasp.

The strength of this suggestion is that it is immune to criticism. By supposition, we are not in a cognitive position to assess whether it is true or not. If something is beyond our grasp, how could we know what it is that is beyond our grasp in order to assess whether we cannot fathom what it would be? Thus, as a response to the problem of evil it is a complete defense. The proponent of the argument from evil, in principle, cannot show that there are no goods that are beyond our cognitive capacities that would justify the evils that occur.

However, I don't believe that the Skeptical Theist defense is fully persuasive. I suggest that the problem of evil arises not from what is beyond our cognitive grasp but from what is within our grasp to assess. We can see that we ourselves have acted to prevent specific instances of evil and what the consequences of doing so have been. When we prevent small children from running into the street when there are cars speeding about, we know that we prevent possible radical evils and don't worry about the effects on some greater good—precisely since we don't know of any greater good that could be achieved by allowing little children to die. We know that overpowering a child and taking away its freedom of action is justified to save its life. In exercising such coercive power with regard to children, we have every reason to believe that we don't thereby prevent some greater good that is unknown to us. After all, if the omni-god exists, then it allowed us to prevent these radical evils! Then why doesn't the omni-god apply coercive power to stop similar radical events from occurring? The omni-god could have easily overpowered the little girl's murderer. The omni-god could have stopped the car from rolling that killed my friend's little girl. Then why didn't He?

In applying vaccinations and antibiotics to completely eradicate aggressive infections and diseases such as smallpox and bubonic plague, we know that we haven't upset the natural order to such a degree that the natural order becomes unstable or that the development of moral courage thereby becomes impossible. Thus, we have very good reason to believe that the instances of particular radical evil that actually occur could also be prevented without endangering the moral order or the natural order of the universe.

I suggest a principle that I shall dub the Principle of Relevant Similarity (PRS):

(PRS) If humans have successfully prevented events from occurring that are relevantly similar to other events that have occurred that could have been prevented by an omni-god (if He exists), and one rationally believes that preventing those events did not deprive the world of some greater good (because the omni-god, if He exists, allowed us to prevent them from occurring), then we also have strong reason to believe that preventing the events that actually occur would not deprive the world of some greater good.

I suggest that PRS is intuitively compelling. Take, for example, that we have successfully eradicated smallpox—the most deadly contagion known

in human history. We have every reason to believe that, if the omni-god exists, then the omni-god would not have allowed us to cure smallpox were the actual occurrence of smallpox necessary to the realization of a greater good. We now know that the actual occurrence of smallpox cases is not necessary to such goods as the stability of the natural order, moral responsibility, the exercise of free will, and so forth. We know these things because we have done just fine without smallpox to plague us. By PRS we also can rationally generalize that curing the AIDS virus would not deprive the world of some essential, more valuable goods (if the omni-god is supposed to exist) or lead to catastrophe regarding the natural and moral order of the world.

Indeed, the AIDS virus either didn't exist as such or was inactive until the first case of AIDS in 1959.⁶ Approximately 32 million people have died from AIDS-related illness since 1980, and at present about 1.5 million people die each year. Young children and women in sub-Sahara Africa are the most common victims of AIDS at present.⁷ We know that AIDS is not essential to some greater good because it didn't even exist until 1959. If we cure it now, the world will be no worse off than in was before 1959. Indeed, the world would be considerably better if we cured AIDS.

We can thus also define a class of natural evils that are intransigent to explanation as necessary to some greater good. We can refer to them as *intransigent evils*. They are "intransigent" because they resist explanation in terms of being necessary for a greater good. They are known to not be necessary to a greater good by the fact that they either no longer exist or only began to exist a short time ago. Smallpox and AIDS are excellent candidates for such intransigent evils. For example, it may be necessary to allow the painful polio shots necessary to inoculate against polio. However, if polio were to cease to exist as a virus, then enduring the pain of polio shots is no longer necessary to achieve such goods. In fact, polio shots would not be necessary to achieve any possible greater good because the very reason for the shots has ceased to exist. By parity of reason, if polio were to cease to exist, and we suppose that the omni-god exists, then we would be in a position to infer that polio (a) was never necessary to any greater good; (b) the nature of the greater good has changed; or (c) the omni-god found some less evil

6. Although the AIDS virus was first recognized in 1981, it appears that the first case was identified in 1959. See "Origin of HIV & AIDS."

7. "Global HIV and AIDS Statistics."

means to achieve the greater good for which polio was necessary. However, if (c) is true, then the omni-god is not omniscient and is therefore not an omni-god. That is, if the omni-god *discovers* some fact about the means of eradicating evils that it didn't know before, it follows that the omni-god was not omniscient. If (b) is true, then the nature of good is not objective and unchanging. It is difficult to imagine any viable ethical theory that would accommodate such change in the nature of what is good. Perhaps matters have changed so much that what once was logically necessary to achieve God's purposes to realize the good has changed, but I cannot imagine how the nature of what is good and right could change in this manner. It is a strange theory of ethics that suggests that today it is morally permissible to purposely infect a person with AIDS but that it wasn't morally permissible yesterday. If (a) is true, then the omni-god isn't perfectly good and thus is not the omni-god. The existence of intransigent evils, then, seems to defeat the Skeptical Theist response to the problem of evil.

Of course, it can be argued that it is only by allowing diseases such as smallpox and AIDS that humans could be inspired to find cures for diseases. Diseases must exist to be cured and cause humans to endeavor to benefit others through their research to cure those diseases. Yet who among us would suggest that it would be a good thing to release a deadly mutant strain of smallpox that is immune to the smallpox vaccination because then it may allow us to look for a further cure? Such suggestions are implausible on their face. Any person who released a new strain of smallpox is properly regarded as a bioterrorist. The reason that such suggestions aren't plausible is that we can see that the potential cost in terms of human suffering does not justify allowing a mutant strain of smallpox to run rampant just so that we can find a cure.

I submit that we also can see that allowing a little girl to be kidnapped and murdered is not necessary to a greater good—for we have prevented similar events from occurring by apprehending and stopping criminals who perpetrate such atrocities. We know quite enough to know, even given our cognitive limitations, that allowing these atrocities does not make the world a better place—even if we cannot assess all of the variables that may be affected. We know that stopping such events from occurring saves little girls from unspeakably reprehensible evil and spares their family the pain of such immense loss. We also know from our experience that the moral order continues to function, the natural world is not thrown into chaos, and that

the only person's freedom that would be truncated of which we are aware (i.e., the murderer's) is one whose freedom should have been truncated.

We also know that the omni-god could have Himself prevented the occurrence of any smallpox or AIDS virus—and no one would have ever known that the omni-god did so. We also can see with pellucid clarity that if the omni-god had made us smarter, even omniscient, we could have found a cure for smallpox much sooner—or even eradicated it before it ever mutated to its deadly form. We could eradicate AIDS now if we were omniscient. It is also clear that making us smarter doesn't render us unfree. Indeed, the omni-god is, if He exists, both omniscient and significantly free (at least that is what its proponents claims). Thus, it is evident that the omni-god had alternatives open to it, even without limiting human freedom in any way, that didn't require the suffering and death of literally hundreds of millions from smallpox—which in ironic cruelty often was carried by Catholic missionaries to Native Americans in an effort to help them and save their souls.⁸

It is true that God may know of goods that are beyond our grasp for allowing smallpox and other similar viruses to wreak havoc on human lives (and animals). Nevertheless, we know that these radically evil events are relevantly similar to acts that the omni-god (if He exists) has allowed us to prevent. Thus, we can conclude from relevantly similar events that we have prevented, that the omni-god did not need them to accomplish some greater good. If He did need them for the greater good, and if the omni-god did exist, then we would not have been allowed to prevent similar atrocities from occurring, because the omni-god would have assured that we did not prevent the atrocities in order to preserve the greater good to which they are somehow necessary. Of course, it can still be argued that there is some significant difference between smallpox that we have eradicated and other infectious diseases (such as Covid-19) that we have not that is relevant to some greater good, and that it is just beyond our ability to grasp this difference.

Thus, it seems to me that the skeptic is right to this extent: we cannot assess an exact percentage of probability that the omni-god wouldn't allow these radical and intransigent evils. We cannot assign a "75 percent probability" or other specific number of judgment to premise 9*. The crucial premise thus cannot be proven with precision or accuracy. Does that mean

8. Kristine B. Patterson and Thomas Runge, "Smallpox and the Native American," 216–22.

that the argument is defeated? Hardly. A rational person is well within his or her rights to conclude that, given the particular evils that occur and the fact that we could prevent them without any evident loss of significant value, the likelihood is extremely high that the omni-god could do at least the same with respect to any particular instance of evil that we identify. We know enough to see very clearly that we do not know of any particular greater good that meets the criteria of a Justified Good for the radical evils I have identified. We can see that any goods we can imagine are not quite good enough to justify the evils in question, or that allowing the evils is not necessary to attain any greater good we can imagine, or that the victim is not themselves benefitted by allowing such evils to occur. *We are thus justified in concluding that, so far as we can see given our cognitive capacities, the existence of the omni-god assumed in the argument from evil does not exist.* That is a pretty significant conclusion—and it is more than enough to justify the rationality of disbelief in such an omni-god. We are also justified in concluding that *intransigent evils are not now necessary to the realization of a greater good.* Indeed, it seems to me that such a conclusion requires us to provide a theodicy—a reasonable explanation of how God could possibly be justified in allowing the radical evils and intransigent evils that occur.

The Problem of Moral Quietude for Skeptical Theism

The believer in the omni-god cannot adopt Skeptical Theism as outlined in ST without significant revision to our moral beliefs. It seems to me that if we really believe that the omni-god exists, so that there are no unjustified evils, then we are justified in moral quietude—in believing that no matter what we do, the particular events of so-called evils that we confront are in reality justified because they are necessary to the realization of some greater good that may well be beyond our cognitive capacity to grasp. If a little girl is raped and bludgeoned to death, it is all for the best, because otherwise the omni-god wouldn't allow it to happen. If we had stopped this event from happening, then we would have prevented a necessary condition for some good so great in value that it outweighs the disvalue of this radical evil.

The response that has been given to this objection from moral quietude has been addressed by Daniel Howard-Snyder, William P. Alston, and Michael Bergmann. They suggest that this conclusion doesn't follow, because in assessing what we will do we are limited by the goods that we can grasp,

whereas the supposed greater goods that God allows are beyond our grasp. Thus, we should still act to prevent events that are, by our best lights, evil.⁹

However, this response overlooks the fact that we are not limited to what is within our cognitive grasp in making moral decisions when we have an authority with much greater knowledge than we possess whose conduct demonstrates that we should refrain from acting. Consider an example. A nurse intern has been working with a team of doctors who are very competent and appear to him to be very morally upright persons. He is tending a patient who goes into convulsions that threaten the patient's life. The hospital where he works has a drug that he learned in nursing school would certainly stop the convulsions. However, he noticed that when this particular patient went into convulsions on prior occasions, the other doctors did not administer the drug—even though they have given the drug to other patients in the hospital when they have had convulsions. The nurse has no idea why they haven't administered the drug in the past to this particular patient. The nurse cannot reach the other physicians and must act immediately. It certainly seems that the nurse has good moral reason not to administer the drug to the patient even though he has no idea why the drug was not given to this patient when it has been given to others under similar circumstances.

Consider now an analogous situation. Sue is a doctor who knows of numerous cases of suffering from prostrate cancer. She knows that millions of people have suffered horribly from prostate cancer. Sue has become a believer in the omni-god and believes that she is rationally justified in her belief. She has come to believe through reflection on the problem of evil that the omni-god must have reasons that she cannot begin to grasp to allow prostate cancer to ravage millions. She trusts that the omni-god is perfectly good and would not allow such cancers if they were not necessary to realize some greater good. She knows that, prior to the cure being developed, some people have had the cancer treated and have successfully prolonged their lives while others have not. She has no explanation for why some respond to the treatments and others do not, but she trusts that the omni-god has reasons. Now suppose that a drug is developed that cures prostrate cancer and is

9. William P. Alston, "Some (Temporary) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil," 311–32; Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," 278–96; Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil," 292–93.

made available to Sue. Sue is confronted with the issue as to whether she will administer the new drug. It seems that Sue is in a relevantly similar situation to the nurse intern and thus would be morally justified in deciding that if she doesn't administer the drug, it is just as well, because if the omni-god in fact allows her not to administer it, she knows that He must have His reasons to not cure the cancer Himself. He must have had reasons to allow the treatment to be successful with some and not with others. Either way, if she does nothing, it must all be for the best, because otherwise the omni-god wouldn't allow it. Further, she believes that the omni-god knows more than any physician about curing cancer, and she also knows that the omni-god hasn't cured cancer before now. She concludes that the omni-god must have had a very good reason to allow the kind of suffering she has seen of those who experience prostate cancer. She also concludes that the evil of prostate cancer is necessary to the realization of whatever very great good the omni-god had in mind. Thus, she concludes that administering the drug will prevent the greater good to which prostate cancer is a necessary condition. Because the omni-god allows prostate cancer to realize this greater good, whatever it could be, she concludes that she must not administer the drug because the omni-god is in a much better position than she is to assess the moral rectitude and interrelated considerations of preventing prostate cancer than she is. She can conclude that, whatever occurs, it is all for the best.

This thought experiment suggests that the problem of moral quietude is a real problem for the skeptic who claims that God must have sufficient reason that we cannot grasp to allow the particular evils that actually occur as a necessary condition to some greater good.¹⁰ The person who believes that every instance of evil is necessary to the realization of some greater good also must believe that if the omni-god allows it to occur, then it is either not really evil or it is justified because it makes a greater good possible. Thus, there is no moral motivation to prevent any events that we take to be horrendous and radical evils. Even if it appears to us that, for all we can fathom, these events should be prevented, belief in the omni-god entails for us that our judgment cannot be trusted and that what appears to us to be unjustified evil cannot truly be so. Thus, it seems to me that this stance is fundamentally at odds with the injunctions of the gospel to feed the poor, care for the widows,

10. This thought experiment is inspired by comments by Derk Pereboom, "The Problem of Evil," 148–72.

and avoid evil. If we fail to do so, it is all for the best if the morally skeptical stance is adopted to defeat the argument from evil.

Moreover, such moral skepticism places everything we think we know about what is right and wrong in question. We cannot assess what is for the best; it is just beyond our grasp. How could we make moral judgments given such global moral skepticism?

Equally important, religious faith seeks to praise God for his moral goodness and beneficence. Yet if God's goodness is radically different than human goodness, then we have no basis in our experience for calling it goodness at all, and we have even less basis for praising and glorifying God as human faith is wont to do. A child who is totally ignorant of her parents' values has no reason to admire them and no ability to emulate them. If everything the child knows as "good" is different from how her parents treat her, and her parents insist that they are good and treating her for her best interests by starving and beating her, then the child must be mystified at what the word "good" could possibly mean to her parents. If the omni-god is good no matter what happens to us, then the terms "right and wrong," "good and evil," and "loving and hateful" lose all distinction and thus lose all meaning.

The Problem of Moral Quietude and Meticulous Providence

There is a very important distinction that must be made regarding whether Skeptical Theism can consistently be adopted. I believe that whether

8

A RELATIONAL AGAPE THEODICY

Agape (ἀγάπη) is the Greek word for charity or love—the kind of love that family members and close friends have for one another. Agape is the type of love that the divine persons in the Godhead have for each other that unifies and deifies them. The agape theodicy differs from the prior finitist and process Mormon theodicies in at least three significant respects. First, it adopts the view that God can exercise maximal power and, for some purposes at least, coercive power. The notion of God’s power is inevitably part of a larger metaphysic of the nature of the eternal realities with which God must work to accomplish his purposes. In addition, this theodicy adopts the view of the Godhead that I argued for in *Exploring Mormon Thought: Of God and Gods*. The divine persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost do not become fully divine at some first moment in time after an eternity of not being fully divine. Rather, they are each fully divine from all eternity. Together they constitute the One Eternal God without beginning or end. They are a united Godhead because in each moment of everlasting time they have freely chosen to love each other with perfect love. Their individual exemplification of divine attributes of godliness is the result of their love for each other. Their mutually indwelling light and glory emerges from their perfect unity. This relationship is fully realized, however, only to the extent that we accept the invitation to join them in their unifying love that seeks its fulfillment in the happiness and growth of others.

The biggest difference between this agape theodicy and the other two theodicies is that it views this world as an environment lovingly ordered to serve us. Evil is not outweighed by some greater good; rather, evil is redeemed by giving it meaning in the interaction. Whether evil remains evil or is re-

deemed because we used it to heal and learn is up to us. The meaning that evil has is not solely up to God in a matter of calculus in weighing evils against the value of greater goods; meaning is instead found in the creative interaction in the world that we bring to it. The point is not to justify evil (as the name “theodicy” would suggest); it is instead a call to action to transform evil by healing it and to transcend evil by overcoming it through love. The point is that evil must be confronted and transformed by our response to it.

In contrast to the other two theodicies that view the world's evils as the result of a hostile and recalcitrant world that resists God's purposes, this theodicy views the world as a result of God's power to order the cosmos to fulfill His purposes. Through the creation, God ordered the world to serve as an environment in which we can learn to love God and each other from our own experiences. While God's power is not absolute and remains subject to the nature of eternally existing realities, God has sufficient power to order the universe in its general purposes. Knowing how to love is not to know about propositions that describe how to love. Knowing how to love is an experiential knowledge. It is a developed way of being in the world based on numerous concrete instances of freely choosing to act in a loving manner—or not. We learn to love by doing concrete moral acts that have real consequences that provide experiential feedback from which we can learn. Love is not something we possess in the abstract. It is a result of character forged in concrete circumstances where we are genuinely free to refuse to love others. The world is set up as a school of experiential learning. It is designed to teach us what can be gained only from experience: learning the consequences of our actions in relation to others and existing in an environment that calls for us to respond with compassion and charity.

However, the world only has this pedagogic character because God has power sufficient to order it in an ingenious manner that challenges us to learn to love. Often we may not see the purpose of certain experiences afforded us until long after they have transpired. Only in retrospect can we appreciate the blessing that our life's experiences have given to us as a sheer gift. The world is filled with loving grace and angels all about us in the guise of other persons who teach us how to love despite ourselves—and despite the fact that they often appear as challenges and problems rather than angels. Only in the fuller context of life's experience can we see that our greatest challenges have been our greatest blessings.

The nature of the test of our loyalty and love at issue in this mortal probation is portrayed through the drama of the book of Job. In the drama, Job's suffering is explained by a prologue of agreements that occurred in another realm of existence and to which Job is not privy (Job 1:6–12). He remains ignorant throughout the entire story of God's reasons for allowing Satan to test him. The challenges are so grave that it is almost unfathomable that Job remains committed to God. In this story, Satan is not a demonic figure of later Christian thought; he is a "prosecutor" whose job in the divine council is to bring out the truth about people through challenges and examination. The tests placed before Job are explained by the fact that Satan challenges God that Job is not truly known to be loyal and faithful despite his apparent goodness. His goodness is merely innocence and not the kind of faithfulness and loyalty that can only be demonstrated in the crucible of circumstances that test Job's commitment to God. God assumes that Satan's challenge has merit. Thus, God agreed with Satan that until Job is put to the test, whether Job's faithfulness is genuine cannot be fully known. This is both because free actions that will be done in the future are unknowable even to God and because Job is a dynamic, living person who will create and declare whether he is faithful through his concrete lived experiences.

Job knows nothing of the contest between God and Satan. When he questions God why he has been put through such trials as physical pain caused by boils and losing his family, possessions, and friends, God does not explain that He is testing Job's loyalty. Rather, God reminds Job of how little he knows of God's purposes, including how little Job understands about the challenges that even God faces with his immense power. For example, despite that power, God struggles with the sea creatures Leviathan and Rahab that represent the chaos that constantly threaten to overwhelm the creation. God does not reveal the context of the tests that were designed to prove Job's trustworthiness and steadfast commitment notwithstanding any challenge that the Prosecutor (Satan) can dish out. The challenges that confront Job, by any measure, are extreme and seem impossible to fathom. Yet Job remains steadfast in his commitment to God. In the end, Job passes the test. (See Job 2:10–15.)

Job-like tests, however, seem to have little relevance to the radical evils that I have identified. While Job passes the test, what of his children who die as the result of a whirlwind so that Job can be tested? What are we to make of their interests? The story, of course, is silent, because it is Job that

God and Satan are focusing their efforts on to prove him one way or the other. But why are they any less important than Job? How could they justly be sacrificed for Job's test consistent with God's justice?

The reality of these kinds of evils is often starker. The heroes often do not appear to pass the test in real life. Like Job, my neighbor just a few doors away lost his wife and two children in a fire. He never recovered psychologically. He remarried and had a son, but he was paranoid and could not leave his family alone out of fear that they too would be randomly selected for death by some freak event. He worked from home and rarely left the house. He died of alcohol poisoning shortly after his son left to go to college. Was the fire, too, a Job-like test, or was it just a freak accident? We, of course, do not know. We do not know the details of the agreements and covenants before this life. We do not know God's mind and purposes. We do not know whether we even have the capacity to fathom the nature of God's plan and what he is up to. What we do know is that death, both our own and of our loved ones, could come at any time. We know that we have been called to love.

A theodicy must address the complete range of evils that we face, and not merely the "great men of history" approach taken so often in scriptural texts. Job's children, who are mere means in the story to move the plot along, are just as valuable to God—and to us—as Job is. People are more than mere plot points. Forfeiting their lives as a means to test Job seems to devalue them in a way that is truly immoral on its face. In fact, without more context, the bargain struck between God and Satan itself seems immoral. Who would want a friend like that—let alone a God? Thankfully, there is much greater context to make sense of these kinds of tests that mortality throws at us. This plan of agape theodicy focuses on God's purposes and our possibilities rather than on the limitations on God's power and knowledge. It focuses on seeing God's hand in all things and the love inherent in the world that surrounds us rather than the hostile tendencies of nature. It emphasizes the radical and voluntary nature of divine love that seeks to persuade us to return God's love with our own freely given love. It focuses on the extreme circumstances that are sometimes necessary to get us to pay attention to God and our duty to love one another.

We usually do not see what God is up to in our lives. The evils that confront us seem overwhelming and out of context if the world were truly organized by a loving God to serve us. In a way similar to the story of Job, the agape theodicy begins by placing our story in a critical context that

begins before this life. It suggests that there are details to which we are not privy as mortals. We do not remember because we have been caused to forget the details of the eternal prologue (see I Cor. 13:12). This prologue is essential context to make sense of our experiences of evil. Unless the experiences of God's glory and goodness were erased from our immediate recall, it would be impossible to put us to the test to prove our faithfulness and to create the possibility of the kind of relationship sought by God.

We are in a position somewhat like the Karate Kid, who is given the task to wash the car and paint the fence by his mentor, Mr. Miyagi. In the story, Mr. Miyagi instructs him to wash the car using specific round-about arm movements: "Wax on, wax off." After a full day of these movements, he is exhausted but sticks with it simply because he trusts Mr. Miyagi to teach him karate at some later time. The next day Mr. Miyagi instructs the Karate Kid to paint the fence using exact arm and wrist movements: "Up, down." The Karate Kid thinks Mr. Miyagi is merely exploiting him to do these meaningless tasks so that Mr. Miyagi can get free labor to wash his cars and paint his fence. He does not see the meaning of the apparently pointless gestures of "wax on, wax off," and "up, down." It is only later that "Daniel-san" learns what his experiences have taught him. Until then, he does not see that he is being taught the most basic moves of karate. To top it off, Mr. Miyagi gives him the car he worked so hard to wax—but certainly not hard enough to buy the car. In an analogous way, we are placed in circumstances with challenges that seem pointless and unjust, but it is only later, perhaps much later, that we realize that these experiences taught us valuable lessons.

The Nature of God's Providence

On the view that I have elucidated in my prior works, God is not unilaterally responsible for the natural regularities that obtain in the natural world. God can determine whether the world is an ordered cosmos governed by natural regularities, but God cannot determine what the natural regularities shall be given that natural laws obtain. (I will use the term "God" to refer equivocally to the individual divine persons or to the Godhead or both.) I have adopted a particular view of natural laws that is characteristically Aristotelian in its assumptions about inherent basic power of natural realities. It may be called the agent-powers-liability view of natural laws. I adopt it because it seems to me to be the view that most naturally falls out of

Mormon commitments that (a) the world cleaves into things that act and things that are acted upon (2 Ne. 2:14–16); and (b) the most fundamental realities (intelligences) have their own basic physical powers to act and to be actuated when moved upon (i.e., they are not further analyzable and cannot be reduced to explanation by more basic levels of existence). For example, two atoms of hydrogen have a basic power to form a valence electron bond with an atom of oxygen to form a molecule of water. Two atoms of hydrogen isotopes have a power to fuse and release energy when in a certain proximity at a certain temperature. Such fusion occurs with regularity in all stars. These are regularities that are explained by the basic powers inherent given the natural kind of thing that hydrogen atoms just are. We cannot analyze these basic powers into yet more basic powers unless we somehow discover that such powers are explained by properties of quarks—in which case the most basic realities will simply be quarks and their powers will be most basic. I am going to explain my view of intelligences and natural laws as a prelude to defending the agape theodicy from objections.

The Nature of Intelligences

On the view presented here, there are two basic types of intelligences: (1) personal intelligences and (2) natural intelligences. Personal intelligences are those eternal sentient beings who have the ability to enter into loving interpersonal relations. This ability requires libertarian free will such that the intelligences can freely choose to accept or reject such relationships. Natural intelligences, on the other hand, express a “naturalistic causal propensity” when they act. This latter term requires some elucidation.

A natural causal propensity is a basic causal power to act in a way that is predictably regular. When natural intelligences act, they do so within a narrow range of behaviors and in a predictable manner that changes very little over time. All things (except perhaps the most basic realities, such as conserved mass of bayrons) decay over time and change their behavior to some degree. That all composed material things decay over time and that material states tend toward greater entropy over time is strong evidence that chaos is the natural state of matter and material states. However, the basic realities that form the world behave with consistent regularity over the spans of time.

Natural intelligences have basic natural causal powers defined by the kinds of things they are. It is a natural causal power of gold atoms to give

rise to the properties of gold. Electrons have the basic natural propensity to orbit nuclei in various valances of atomic nucleuses. It is a natural propensity of hydrogen and oxygen atoms to be able to form molecular bonds and give rise to the properties of water when in molecular unity. There are deterministic natural tendencies to the extent that the actions of these basic realities are invariably regular and always follow the same predictable patterns of regularity with exact predictability. However, at a certain level—the quantum level—predictability becomes fuzzy, and there are degrees of freedom in describing how subatomic particles will act.

Personal intelligences, on the other hand, do not act with predictable regularity in the manner described of a natural causal tendency. Joseph Smith taught that the most essential part of humans—the mind, soul, spirit, or intelligence—is uncreated: “Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither can it be” (D&C 93:29). In Joseph’s thought, the term “intelligence” minimally refers to “truth” about what constitutes a person’s individual essence. Such truth is independent of God’s creative power. Thus, the concept of “intelligence” includes minimally what we today would call individual essences or *haecceities*.¹ Such truth or intelligence has an existence independent of God because it includes what is true of persons, given the fact that they are free to act for themselves. Joseph’s revelation boldly asserts: “All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence. Behold, here is the agency of man” (vv. 30–31).

However, intelligence is not a mind-dependent concept of merely ideal possible persons as it is for Molinism; rather, intelligence is the defining property of actual entities that Joseph later called “intelligences.” Individual intelligences exist necessarily in the same way that God’s existence as an individual is naturally necessary:

We say that God himself is a self-existing being. . . . Who told you that man does not exist in like manner upon the same principles? Man does exist upon the same principles. . . . The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is co-eternal with God himself. . . . There never was a time when there were not spirits; for they are co-eternal with our Father in heaven. . . . God

1. See Blake T. Ostler, “The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought,” 59–78.

never had the power to create the spirit of man at all. Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existence principle. It is a spirit from age to age and there is no creation about it.²

Every individual person that can exist in mortality existed eternally prior to mortality as a personal intelligence. These intelligences exist independently of God's creative power because it is their nature to exist. It is fairly discernible from Joseph's sermons and writings that personal intelligences have the following properties: (1) they have delimited and stable personal identity; (2) they have a basic power to be self-determining and autonomous; (3) they are individuated in the sense that one could be "more intelligent than the other" (Abr. 3:18–19); (4) they have the capacity to advance through further organization and integration with material bodies;³ (5) their individual enhancement and growth is not possible in the absence of moral opposition and genuine moral temptation; and (6) by freely entering into a loving relationship with God, it is the nature of personal intelligences that they can grow in light, truth, knowledge, and power until they enjoy the fullness of unity and glory that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost share (D&C 132:20).⁴

Though eternal intelligences are not contingent and thus do not depend on God for their existence, there is a sense in Joseph's thought in which the *abilities* of intelligences depend on God. God's spirit or light that dwells in all realities "quickeneth your understandings . . . [and] giveth life to all things" (D&C 88:11–13). By this I understand that the ability of an intelligence to integrate its experience into a unified consciousness of experience seems to be dependent on God's sustaining power. Further, no growth of any kind would be possible for intelligences without God's active power to enhance and actualize the capacities inherent in each individual intelligence.

2. Joseph Smith Jr., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 352–53. The amalgamated text states: "Man existed in spirit; the mind of man—the intelligent part—is as immortal as, and is coequal with, God Himself." See Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse—A Newly Amalgamated Text," 196.

3. Larson, 203

4. *Lectures on Faith*, 5:2–3

*The Ontological Status of Natural Laws*⁵

According to Joseph Smith, the most basic “elements” or constituents of matter are also uncreated and eternal. On the view that I present here, all material states are subject to God’s power. The “light” of God proceeds from “God’s presence to fill the immensity of space” and “is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God” (D&C 88:12–14). It is an imminent power that is infused in all things to organize matter and give life to all things (vv. 7–10). God’s immanent light is thus the co-source of natural laws. The “thingness” of organized material objects depends on God’s creative power, for “that which is governed by law is preserved by law” (v. 34). Moreover, God has “given a law to all things by which they move” (v. 42). God’s imminent power is the source of all order in the universe.

The natural state of matter is chaos. It is only when informed by God’s creative power that order arises from chaos. In Doctrine and Covenants 88, Joseph Smith’s revelation described that the natural bodies move according to laws that define how the planets and stars will move. That there are natural laws at all is totally up to God. As the revelation states, God gives a law to all things by which they move with regular patterns of behavior. However, exactly *what* the natural laws will be is *not* totally up to God. On the view of agent-causal powers and liabilities as the basis of natural law that I present, material states have certain capacities and natural inclinations that define how they will act. These powers are basic to the natural kind that a basic reality just is. There are certain essential properties that define what causal powers can be exerted by underlying material states.

Perhaps an analogy can help to explain this view of natural laws and their relation to God. Both hydrogen and oxygen may be organized in many different ways, but whenever they are organized as H₂O they exhibit their causal power to produce the properties of water. Moreover, water is essentially H₂O. If something exhibited properties of water but did not consist of H₂O, it would not be water. Similarly, when protons and neutrons are organized having a certain proper atomic number, their causal powers *always* produce the same element. For instance, consider the properties of gold (Au): atomic number=79; atomic mass=196.96655 amu; number of protons/

5. I have described my view of natural laws more fully in Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God*, ch. 4.

neutrons = 79; number of neutrons = 118; density = 293 K: 19.32 g/cm³). *That the constituents of matter are organized at all is due to God's power; that such constituent parts have the causal powers they do, which result in particular elements and compounds, is due to the properties of the eternal constituents.* That water is organized depends both on God's concurring power or light given to the atoms of hydrogen and oxygen to exercise their power of covalent bonding *and* also on the basic natural powers of hydrogen and oxygen to bond in molecular union.

God has the power to organize matter in any way that is possible for the matter to be organized. He has this power because the intelligences that constitute matter trust God's word unconditionally. Thus, God can produce any results that are possible given the potential properties arising from the innumerable permutations of the most basic material constituents. Joseph Smith's writings presuppose that God cannot bring about natural laws that are contrary to the natural capacities of these material states. For example, although logically possible, Joseph asserted that it is impossible for God to create out of nothing the most basic constituents of matter. Further, God could not create matter that is not located in space-time (D&C 88:36–37). What is physically possible is not limited solely by logical possibility but also by what is *nomologically* possible (*nomos* is Greek for "law"). For example, it may be impossible for God to create matter in a closed system such that entropy does not increase when energy is expended. It is impossible for God to annihilate mass–energy. Neither of these acts is logically contradictory in first order logic, and thus they are logically possible acts. However, they are neither physically nor nomologically possible.

Thus, the most reasonable resolution of Joseph Smith's view is that he conceived of natural laws as a combination of the energy or power to move and act originating with God, and the capacities to move and act as originating with the eternal constituents of matter. Whether that was his view or not, what I propose is a form of divine concurrence—any basic act of a given reality (say an organic molecule) requires God's concurring power to realize its natural propensity to act. The ways in which the law-like natural tendencies of material states are manifested depends on the causal powers of the material states and the various ways it is nomologically possible for them to be organized. God's power is the source of order, but God is not a complete determiner of what that order shall be. The power deriving from God to organize material states is analogous to the electricity necessary to power a computer. The software that organizes data is analogous to God's

will as to how things shall be organized. The material state consisting of eternal matter is like the hardware of a computer that defines its capacities to run the software. Not even God could run software on a Mack truck. The nature of the basic realities that make up the constituents of a Mack truck do not have the natural capacity to run software.

God can neither have water that is not H_2O nor H_2O that is not water. God cannot have two atoms of oxygen that are covalently bonded with an atom of carbon that do not have the deterministic natural propensity to form carbon dioxide. However, God could prevent carbon from bonding covalently with oxygen to form carbon dioxide by not lending his concurrence to the atoms to form the compound. God could prevent water from having its causal powers by choosing to not give his concurring power to hold it in an organized form. Thus, God has a form of coercive power with respect to natural intelligences. Natural intelligences are just the various most basic natural substances of the various natural kinds that actually obtain in our universe. God can act on natural substances to bring about all of the results possible given the natural causal powers of the constituents of the universe.

Thus, it is within God's power to "suspend" or "revoke" the natural laws by ceasing to lend his organizing concurrent power to material states. However, the result would not be for matter to suddenly have different capacities or for there to be different natural laws; rather, in the absence of God's sustaining power the universe consumes itself in entropy and the cosmos is reduced to chaos. However, it must also be emphasized that organization of material states adds more than the mere sum of the parts. What material states are possible for God to organize is not limited to mere permutations of matter, because organization leads to new capacities on a new level of existence. Water looks and acts nothing like its constituent parts of hydrogen and oxygen and has a life sustaining power that neither of them alone has. The possibilities of complexity are literally unlimited. The sheer possibilities of complexity arising, for instance, from the DNA strands suggest that matter is infinitely permeable. Joseph Smith's revelation recognized that new levels of organization lead to capacities that are hardly imaginable to human beings: "For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element inseparably connected to receive a fullness of joy; and when separated cannot receive fullness of joy" (D&C 93:33–34).

There are also at least two ways to construe the time intervals in which God can bring about states of affairs. In other words, there are two

ways as to how quickly God can realize his purposes through concurring power in relation to organizing the matter in the world. In the “quick results” interpretation God can instantaneously bring about the desired causal results. God grants concurring power to atoms of hydrogen in the vicinity of atoms of oxygen, and they immediately interact to bring about water. If God withdraws that concurring power, the atoms of hydrogen and oxygen would immediately cease to be water because the atoms of hydrogen and oxygen will not bond to form water.

The “slow burn” interpretation, in contrast, provides that God takes time to achieve his purposes. For example, when God withdraws concurring power to atoms of hydrogen and oxygen, they decay over time to revert back to atoms of hydrogen and oxygen that are not in a molecular bond. The disintegration of the atoms is subject to the laws of entropy in their increasing disorder over time. When God grants concurring power to atoms to enter into bonds or express their natural causal propensities, it takes time for the results to be realized. Thus, God’s organizing power may require vast amounts of time to be realized. God’s power may require vast amounts of time of progressive evolution to bring about a DNA strand that expresses the properties of complex life. As a result, the slow burn view is much more like the process view with respect to God’s interaction with the natural world. It is also much more consonant with the theory of evolution. Further, the slow burn model is really an assessment of how long it takes, given the natural laws that actually obtain, for natural processes to transpire. However, the agape theodicy utilizes both models depending on the nature of the realities on which God acts.

Because I have already discussed a process theodicy, I will not elucidate this view further and will assume that God may at times have quick results power with respect to higher order realities like humans and animals that have more developed central nervous systems and slow burn power with respect to many other natural processes in the universe. God at times has quick burn power with respect to personal intelligences—but only if they freely cooperate. God has both quick results and slow burn power with respect to natural intelligences to the extent that they cooperate. How much time is necessary to achieve God’s purposes depends on the preexisting configurations and capacities of the material constituents, given their natural propensities. However, over time natural intelligences are much more pre-

dictable and subject to divine purposes and power because they act of a deterministic natural propensity.

God's Providential Power and Knowledge

The most common objection to a resolution to the problem of evil that proposes any limitation to God's power is that such a God simply lacks enough power to evoke awe and worship. However, some limitations on divine power are necessary to avoid logical inconsistencies. God does not require power to do the following to be maximally powerful: (a) be able to bring about the acts of free agents; (b) do anything inconsistent with the divine attributes; or (c) have power to alter what has occurred in the past. There is still need, though, for a theodicy to explain why God allows events to occur that He has sufficient power to prevent. Thus, it must be stressed that the ontological commitments of the agape theodicy do not simply dissolve the problem of evil as in a finitist theology. However, the objection that these ontological commitments limit God too much dissolves upon closer examination.

God's Power. Given Joseph Smith's ontological commitments, the maximum possible power consists in all the power that it is possible for any agency

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