

Editors' Note

This paper was delivered at the 1980 Sunstone Theological Symposium.

RELIGION is often viewed functionally as performing two important roles in the life of a believer: first the *explanation* of the physical phenomena—interpreting the universe, man's existence, and the events of history and daily life; and second the *justification* of a way of life—providing both the grounds for belief in a moral code and the motivating reasons for obeying that code. My contention in this paper is that the Mormon view of God and his relationship to man eliminates God's ability to play a substantial part in this second functional role of religion, the provision and justification of a moral code. Morality, in Mormonism, is independent of the will and dictates of God.

Basic Precepts of Mormon Theology

But first let me acknowledge that Mormon thinking on such questions as the natures of God and man and

existence. They are of equal (and infinite) antiquity. Both are subject to law, natural and moral. There are, of course, many important differences between God and man, but these do not concern the essence of either.¹

It follows from this doctrine that God is not seen as creating the universe out of nothing but rather as "finding himself" in it.²

Another central doctrine concerns the purpose of earth life. God arranged for us to experience this life so that we might gain opportunities for moral development and progression. The nurturing of this moral growth—which will lead us to greater fulfillment, power, and happiness—is God's overriding purpose in dealing with us.

I think, and have argued elsewhere,³ that this doctrine of God and man simplifies significantly the task of the Mormon apologist faced with such traditionally difficult problems for the orthodox theologian as the existence of evil and suffering in the universe of a god who is supposed to want to eliminate them. But here I wish to consider a problem which, in principle at least, most of

What is Moral Obligation within Mormon Theology?

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WHAT MAKES RIGHT ACTS RIGHT AND WRONG ACTS WRONG?

their relationship to each other is not entirely univocal. I choose the central doctrines outlined here because I find them stimulating, internally cohesive, and consistent with the main body of latter-day revelation and because I feel that it is primarily by exploring those points at which Mormonism may differ from orthodox Christianity that a Mormon may hope to contribute to theological discussion.

One central precept in Mormon theology holds that God and man are the same type of being. Both are ontologically independent, i.e. self-existent, dependent on no other being for their origin and continued

Christianity appears to have solved quite neatly, but which may be more difficult for Mormonism.

The Problem of Moral Justification

The problem concerns the justification of the grounds of moral obligation. How can there be moral laws? How can it be that some acts are right and some wrong, that there is a real moral obligation incumbent on us to act in some ways and to avoid others? Are there general, unifying principles behind whatever duties we may have? Can we say in some general way what makes right acts right and wrong acts wrong?

In orthodox thinking it is often said that such and such is wrong because God has declared it so. This is his universe and he makes the rules. While this may look at first like a fairly facile explanation of the grounds of moral obligation, we must keep in mind the orthodox view of the relationship between God and man. Man is wholly God's creature and utterly dependent (contingent) on him. He owns us. To refuse to

There is, however, a significant difference between our relationship to other persons and our relationship to God. We may not owe him our very existence, but it can hardly be denied within Mormon theology that we owe him a great deal. Perhaps we can make some argument similar to the one available to the orthodox theologian based on what we do owe him, such as our physical bodies and our earthly life with its peculiar opportunities

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acknowledge his moral sovereignty⁴ is to set one's will in opposition to the grounds of its very being. Thus, man's moral status as subject is based on the firm ground of his ontological status as creature.

What defense of moral obligation can be made within Mormonism? The tactic of saying that God owns the universe and has, therefore, absolute authority over everything in it does not seem to be available to the Mormon theologian. In fact, a quick glance at the outlines of Mormon doctrine leaves one wondering how God could ever have authority over other self-existent beings in whose presence he found himself. It is, on the other hand, remarkable and perplexing that a religion which attributes to man essential independence from God should have schooled a people with such reverence for God's will that Sterling McMurrin could say that Mormons along with Puritans place a "profound emphasis of the moral sovereignty of God."⁵

Let us begin by inquiring after this alleged sovereignty. Might moral obligation, still, even for Mormons, be founded on our relationship to God? The Mormon rejects the contingency of man on God, so God's right to command will have to be based on some other ground. But we do not normally suppose that one person can, all other things being equal, either by the mere exercise of his will or by issuing a command or order, morally obligate another. Their souls would have to stand in some very special relationship (such as creator/creature) before such an exercise of will or such a command could have such a binding effect. In all of the earthly relationships where we might be inclined to say that such an obligating could occur, e.g. employer/employee, officer/private, the power of such a command to obligate the subject (if such power exists at all) seems to be based on a promise, explicit or implicit, ("I will do as I'm instructed") made by the moral subject (the employee or private). Furthermore, the promise and the relationship seem conditioned on each other. If the relationship were terminated, the promise would be void and the moral binding authority which rested on that promise would disappear. I delay briefly the consideration of obligations arising from promises. It is necessary here only to recognize that it seems that all earthly cases of one individual being able to morally obligate another by his mere will or command are based on such promises.

for progression. Might he not have the right to command how we use our bodies and the opportunities we are given here? An analogy may help to illuminate this question.

Suppose a young woman, to fulfill her desires for an education and for greater social development, needs a car. She is (we will stipulate) utterly incapable of providing a car for herself, but she wants one badly. A very rich and generous man sees her need and secretly gives her a car, which she finds in her driveway one morning, fully equipped with registration, license, keys, and an owner's certificate bearing her name. Amazed but delighted, she prepares to drive off, when a man walking down the street interrupts her to say, "By the way, I talked to a man who said he gave you that car, and he insists that you not ever use the right rear door." Surprised, she asks whether she must promise not to use that door as a condition of receiving the car. "No," he replies. "Would my using that door result in my losing the car?" Again, "No." "Would it have any effect on my prerogatives in driving the car?" Once more, "No." Baffled, she enters the car (probably by the left front door) and drives off.

Is the woman morally obligated never to use the right rear door? Could she be held to have committed an actual moral transgression if she did use it? I think the answer is no. No real moral obligation has been created. The woman made no promises, explicit or implicit, in accepting or operating the car, and there were no conditions at all to her receiving it.

It might be objected that one ought to feel a kind of gratitude upon receiving a gift which would prompt obedience to the wishes of the giver concerning at least the use of the gift. That is, it would be wrong not to feel a particular kind of gratitude upon receiving a gift. But in considering this objection, it is crucial to remember the level on which we are reasoning. We are trying to discover whether anything is morally right or wrong in general and in particular whether God can make things right or wrong. To cite this particular duty (i.e. the obligation to feel a gratitude entailing obedience) in the context of this argument is either to assume one of the things which was to be proven (if one assumes that such a duty is based on the will or commandment of God) or to exalt the obligation to feel this kind of gratitude to the status of the ultimate moral principle (at least so far as

earthly existence is concerned). But surely the alleged obligation to obey the wishes of the giver of a gift is at least as suspect and in need of defense as those obligations it is being used to defend. But without appeal to any such obligations of gratitude, respect, or obedience, it is hard to believe that the woman is really under a moral obligation to avoid using the right rear door of her own car. Now, so far as his ability to obligate us by the mere exercise of his will is concerned, our relationship to God is identical to the woman's relationship with the giver of the car. (God's commands are, to be sure, less arbitrary than that in the story, but this arbitrariness serves to isolate the source of the obligation in the will of the giver.) So I conclude that God's will or command is, by itself, insufficient to obligate us. We are *essentially* "co-equal"⁶ with God, and binding our wills by his is not one of his prerogatives.

Promises and Covenants

Since no other agent can morally bind my will to his, it is natural to ask whether I can do so myself through some vow of allegiance or obedience. There are within Mormonism at least two ways in which I could do this. The first is a premortal promise. There may, at some point in our eternal existence have come a time when there was some potential blessing so great that we promised God that we would obey him if he would give us that blessing. (A prime candidate for such a blessing is the opportunity to enter this mortal existence.)

as the ground for all others. The fact that it is wrong to break promises makes it wrong to disobey God. But we must then ask what makes it wrong to break promises. While I admit that promise-keeping has more of the flavor of a fundamental principle of morality than does obeying the wishes of a gift giver, the binding force of promises still stands in need of some justificatory basis independent of the will of God. If, then, all our obligations to obey God are based on further obligations which God has no role in creating and which we make binding on ourselves through our own volition, then once again, it seems, God lacks genuine moral sovereignty; right and wrong are essentially independent of the divine will or decree, and we may look elsewhere for the ultimate justification of moral obligation.

A Direct Argument against Divine Sovereignty

Thus far, my argument for the independence of morality from the will of God has been an essentially negative one, trying to show that, within Mormonism, arguments in favor of the moral sovereignty of God are untenable. There may be a more direct argument from the nature of God and man to this same conclusion. One aspect of Mormonism's insistence on the essential similarity of God and man is the startling teaching that "as man is, God once was." Although it is hard to know just how literally to take this teaching, if it is true in any meaningful way, it entails the understanding that God's

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But at least one of the necessary conditions for holding a person bound by his promises is that he knows (or at least believes) that he made the promise. But since we do not remember having made any such promise, such a promise, made by all persons before this life, could not serve as a grounds for God's right to command. I am left to conclude that, since neither God's will nor our own exercised in an unremembered past can obligate us to obey God's commands, there is no general defense, applicable to all persons, of the moral sovereignty of God.

But before I leave the consideration of obligations based on promises, I must examine one other sort of promise. It is noteworthy that within a church whose doctrine places so much emphasis on the moral independence of each person there should have reemerged such a strong emphasis on the making of covenants as is found in Mormonism. For current purposes, it is sufficient to stipulate that within Mormon theology a covenant includes a promise on the part of some person to obey God either in some specific set of commandments or in general. Might Mormons' strong feelings of the obedience they owe God be justified by the covenants they have made to obey him? Once again we seem to be invoking one moral principle

relationship to morality was once even as ours is now. There were duties, not of his own creation, that were as obligatory on him as any are on us.

Nowhere in Mormon theology does there exist the idea that anyone's (even God's) relationship to morality can change over time. It is, of course, assumed that it is no longer much of a struggle for God to do what's right, but this does not mean that he is not subject to the same moral imperatives we are. If he has no need for a moral sovereign to make them binding on him, then neither do we. So I conclude again that morality is independent of the will and word of God.

Another Theory of Commandments

If, then, commandments are not pieces of moral legislation, they must be viewed as revelations in which God enlightens us concerning truths independent of himself. Perhaps there is some underlying reason why God reveals them as he does, and we can find in this reason the key to their obligatory force. Having such a rich conception of God's purpose in providing this life for us, Mormons have often sought in that purpose the explanation of God's commandments. From Joseph Smith's declaration that happiness "is the purpose and will be the end" of this life if we obey those principles

(the commandments) which lead to it,⁷ through the humblest sacrament meeting talk, Mormon discourse is replete with the idea that God knows what will make us happy, and he gives commandments to guide us toward that end. There are, according to this view, quasi-natural laws which govern our ability to grow and be happy, e.g. "a person who forgives another is freed from a torment and hate which impede the development of the ability to love." Knowing these natural laws, God develops moral laws intended to promote growth and happiness, e.g. "Thou shalt forgive all men."⁸

This view of commandments I will call the "roadmap to happiness." I would like to discuss two problems with this view of moral law. The first is an especially acute version of a general problem with teleological ethics, i.e. ethics which judges the rightness of actions and personality traits according to the goodness of the results towards which they tend to lead. Let us assume this "roadmap to happiness" view of moral law and further assume that one of the things that will make us happiest is to be unselfish, to seek not our own. Now it seems reasonable to require a teleological (results oriented) ethical system that the results it seeks to maximize (on which it judges actions) may be held as the goals of worthy moral agents. Phrased another way, it may be a test of morally worthy people that they should have as their own ends those ends toward which teleological duties point. In the case of the "roadmap to happiness" view of morality, then, a righteous person would be seeking his own growth and happiness, his own benefit. But there is something paradoxical (and probably even contradictory) about being selfless in order to benefit yourself. So, while moral laws are aimed toward achieving one set of ends, in order to actually fulfill those ends, we must often refrain from being philosophers and must obey those laws as if they pointed at other ends or at no ends at all.

While this is a sad predicament for a moral theory, it may not be decisive against it. I hope my second objection is decisive. Consider what we are saying when we condemn someone for breaking a moral law. We are not merely saying, "See here, you've done something to hurt yourself, to limit your own growth and happiness." The problem is that the "roadmap to happiness" version of morality seems to reduce morally binding commandments to mere counsels of prudence (Kant's

to forgive others. But our general idea of moral law is that it is binding on all of us, irrespective of our desires. We don't get to decide for ourselves which laws apply to us.

Thus the commandment-as-good-advice aspect of the "roadmap to happiness" version of morality is inconsistent with our intuitions about the universal obligatory force of moral laws. Disobedience, we say, is sin not just imprudence. Thus, if we are looking for a theory of morality that can defend moral laws as binding on us, this view of the explanation of moral laws is inadequate, and we have still failed to isolate the source of our obligation to obey these laws.

But it should be pointed out that this does not necessarily disqualify this theory as an accurate account of morality, especially in the absence of any more compelling alternative. It may just be that there is nothing more to morality than hypothetical imperatives. Indeed, although it fails to account for some of our moral intuitions, this view seems to fit well with the relatively naturalistic Mormon view of the universe and the Mormon notion of the teleological purpose of life.

A Sketch of a Positive Moral Theory

Having been mainly critical up to this point, I would like to present a hint at a direction we might explore for more insights into a constructive, synthetic approach to Mormon ethics. Since I am searching for some fundamental moral principle, I begin by investigating an apocryphal Mormon saying of some currency: Obedience is the first law of heaven.⁹ I think that this saying, which I have long detested, admits of at least three possible interpretations. The first understands "obedience" as obedience to authority, primarily God. I hope that my discussion of the moral relationship between our eternal souls and God has shown at least that it cannot be our primary duty to submit ourselves to another's will. Such an interpretation is also inconsistent with the notion of moral development which includes, rather, increasing self-sufficiency and self-determination.

A second interpretation understands the "obedience" in "obedience is the first law of heaven" as obedience to laws in general, i.e. all the rest of the laws of heaven. This, however, is not a law in itself, but merely a restatement of the fact that the other laws *are* laws.

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"hypothetical imperatives"). These have the form "if you want *x*, then do *y*." Part of the problem with hypothetical imperatives in ethics is that they have no more claim to govern our actions and tell us to do *y* than we have desire to obtain *x*. And when there is no moral obligation to obtain *x* we are free not to do *y*. Thus if you don't care about growing and being happy, you have no obligation

Obedience, in this sense, isn't a law but something you do to a law.

The third interpretation (and the one which I, despite my long-held contempt for this saying, intend to defend) holds that it is from the very *concept* of obedience to law that all the laws of heaven may be derived.¹⁰

What matters most in the Mormon universe is not so

much the moral worthiness of the actions that are performed as the moral worthiness of the agents who perform them. And what is crucial in determining the moral worthiness of an individual is not so much the actions that he performs as his reasons for performing them, i.e. the motivations or principles which govern him or by which he governs his actions. So, if in moral theory we are seeking a standard by which to judge actions, this standard will evaluate not the action itself but rather the reason it is being performed. Now the reason or subjective ground from which we are acting can always be expressed in the form of a rule, e.g. "if

moral sovereignty of God also robs God of the possibility of genuine moral decision making. Since whatever he wills is right, there is never a moral reason for him to desire one thing rather than another, and he can never discover what he *ought* to will or do. While this implication of the alleged moral sovereignty of God is very uncomfortable for orthodox religion, it would be disastrous for Mormonism, which insists that, in principle at least, the individual referred to by the title "God" can learn and discover truth and moral right. He is good in that he, too, learned obedience and conformed himself to the moral law.

The roadmap to happiness version of morality reduces morally binding commandments to mere counsels of prudence.

you're going to be embarrassed by some situation, avoid that situation" or "always seek to make others happy." So it is these subjective rules by which we act which are the proper objects of moral evaluation. They have the form of laws and our actions are morally worthy if those subjective rules out of which they are performed accord with universal moral laws. But since this standard is being proposed as the *fundamental* criterion of the morality of actions, logically prior to the existence of any substantive moral laws, conformity of the rules behind our actions with moral laws can only mean that those rules are worthy to be made into moral laws themselves. So the agent, to act rightly, must examine the reasons for his actions and ask whether he can in full rationality and honesty will that they should be universal laws.

This is true obedience to law in the universal sense, and it becomes, through the personal moral struggle of individual moral agents, the mother of all the laws of heaven. Acting in accordance with this view of morality, we discover, and in some sense legislate, our own moral laws. This notion of morality involves the agent in determining for himself what is right through developing moral sensitivity and through *committing* himself to moral principles rather than *submitting* himself to a code or another will. This process enhances the self-realization and moral development which God purposed in providing this earthly existence.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a final defense of my belief that, as strange and initially uncomfortable as it may seem within a faithful religion, the view that the foundation of morality is completely independent of the will and dictates of God has much to recommend it.

First, even though the doctrine of the moral sovereignty of God seems to provide a strong foundation for morality, there are great dangers in this doctrine. This doctrine seems to run the risk of severely compromising what we mean by "right" and "good." It reduces the important religious assertion "God is good" to something like "God does whatever God decrees should be done" or "God's will is consistent with God's will." This is, it should be clear, hardly what we mean to say when we say "God is good." The doctrine of the

Finally, acknowledging that the ultimate responsibility for determining right and wrong lies with each individual seems more likely to lead to a rich, fertile moral life. We must work out our own salvation. Our progression consists in developing our moral intuitions and capacities. Rote obedience to another will or even to a prescribed code is severely limited in its ability to promote this end. It is best for our eternal happiness and progression that we develop our capacity to make moral discriminations and choices through personal moral effort and the development and refinement of our own moral faculties.



Notes

1. Note that I am here using the term "God" as a name, not as a title. "God is perfect" is a necessary truth only when "God" is used as a title, i.e. perfection is essential to *Godhood*, but not to God himself.
2. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950), p. 354.
3. Kim McCall, "Mormonism and the Problem of Evil," *Century 2* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Provo, Ut.: BYU Press).
4. As this concept of the "moral sovereignty of God" constitutes a central focus of this paper, it should be defined clearly. It is the idea that God is a moral legislator. God is a moral sovereign if and only if whenever he wills (or perhaps decrees) that we should do *x*, he thereby, and solely because of his willing (or decreeing), morally obligates us to do *x*.
5. Sterling M. McMurrin, "The Religious Thought of E. E. Ericksen," an introductory essay to E. E. Ericksen, *The Psychological and Ethical Aspects of Mormon Group Life* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1975), p. vii.
6. *Teachings*, p. 353.
7. *Ibid.* p. 255-256.
8. Doctrine and Covenants 64:10.
9. It is difficult to discover the source of this saying, but it occurs as the first sentence under "Obedience" in Bruce McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (2nd ed.; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), p. 539. It has always perplexed me that such an idea could be maintained in the face of Jesus's own avowal, when asked the question directly, that Love was the greatest commandment in the Law.
10. At this point my indebtedness to Kant approaches plagiarism.

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