



THE FOUNDATIONS OF FREEDOM IN MORMON THOUGHT

Mormonism May Require a Belief in Determinism

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It is relatively rare in philosophy to find a topic about which the truth is known. I believe, however, that on the topic of freedom the outlines of the truth can be recognized. This by no means suggests that everyone understands or knows what the truth is. For example, in applying freedom or free will to theological topics such as the problem of evil, even some very famous papers are seriously flawed, in my judgment, by not correctly understanding the foundations.¹

We can begin to get at the foundations by asking this important question: Are there any views about the world which would make it possible to make good sense of freedom? Perhaps the most talked-about variant of that question in contemporary society is: Is determinism consistent with freedom?

In discussing this whole set of issues, it is first important to have a correct account of determinism. Determinism is simply the view that there is order, that there are regularities and patterns in the world. If one can understand what these regularities are and describe them correctly, one might capture them as laws. With these patterns or laws, one could then describe and even explain events in the world. If one can explain events in the world, then one can understand the world or at least that portion of the world about which one has an explanation. The world, then, can be perceived as rational, that is intelligible and understandable.

Now if one can discover regularities, describe them, explain them, it is possible that one might occasionally be able to predict events. Predictability is based on the presumption of a link between cause and effect; the same causes produce the same effects. This does not mean that one can predict everything. Some of the

causes may not be known, or the relationships between causes and effects may not be understood. Given the connection between causes and effects, determinism is often called "causal determinism." Or in other words: "Determinism . . . is the thesis that all human behaviour is governed by causal laws."²

Most of us are determinists without knowing it. If we did not believe in determinism, there would be no point in attending universities or in trying to discover or explain anything. Virtually every discipline in the university, including the physical, life, and social sciences, depends on the assumption that there are regularities to discover and relationships to explain. We may not as yet know many of the regularities or laws in the social sciences, but we do not believe that people do what they do for no reason at all. Even in the humanities, we assume that determinism is true. We assume that the instructor in a class on Joyce or Hemingway has perceived some patterns or regularities that will help the students understand why these authors wrote as they did.

There is nothing in this whole complex of ideas to suggest that determinism is incompatible with freedom. The realization that causes produce effects does not mean that one cannot change the causes. What frequently happens, however, is that determinism is confused with fatalism. Fatalism is the view that everything that happens has in some sense been pre-arranged or pre-arranged to happen the way it happens. Nothing we can now immediately do will have any effect on events. People who hold this view argue, for example, that when it is a person's time to die (and that time is pre-set), there is nothing that person can do to avoid the time or manner of death. The soldier on the battlefield would then believe that it doesn't make any difference whether he stays down in his foxhole or runs toward the enemy.

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If there is a bullet that has his number on it, it would even go around corners and down into the foxhole to get him. Some people find comfort in this view, but resignation more often goes along with fatalism. One can do nothing about poverty or disease or death, for example.

Let me tell you clearly that I do not care for such a position. There is no freedom in such a world view. Anciently, the Stoics believed that all of the events in the world were fated with one exception. One could reorient one's mind to accept whatever happened instead of becoming bitter or angry about events. If, however, even the orientation of the mind is fated, then there is no freedom whatsoever.

circumstances may intervene to prevent you doing what you may want to do. The world is completely irrational, and no one can understand anything.

Let us summarize the argument so far. While determinism, the idea of cause and effect, does not seem to preclude the possibility of freedom, fatalism, predestination, and indeterminism do. We must still define, however, the way in which determinism allows for freedom. In a famous article, W.T. Stace argues for a distinction which allows us to begin to make sense of the idea of freedom. He agrees with the definition of determinism we have used here, that all acts are caused, and then asserts that the free actions are those that are caused by me—by my internal psychological states—and

PREDESTINATION	FATALISM	DETERMINISM		INDETERMINISM
PREARRANGED BY GOD	PREARRANGED NOTHING I CAN DO WILL AFFECT ANY EVENT	CAUSES		CHANCE RANDOM
		EXTERNAL	INTERNAL	
NO FREEDOM	NO FREEDOM	UNFREE	FREE	NO FREEDOM

Determinism is the only view which makes any sense of freedom. In fact freedom requires determinism.

Predestination is simply an explicitly theological version of fatalism. The only difference is that in predestination everything is pre-arranged by God. In this view, the natural laws and the moral laws are all created by God, and all creatures are similarly created by God (*ex nihilo*) to be whatever God pre-destines them to be.³ As explained by St. Augustine, if you are pre-destined to be damned, you will be damned no matter how good you try to be because your trying has no bearing on whether or not you will be saved. Those so pre-destined Augustine described by the Latin phrase *posse peccare*, or possible to sin. For them, it was not only possible to sin; it was impossible not to. As with fatalism, if one believes fully in predestination, there is clearly no freedom. One of the attractive aspects of predestination, however, is that it can explain the complete and total omniscience of God.⁴

Some writers have become so frustrated with fatalism, predestination, and determinism that they search for any alternative in order to make sense of freedom. The alternative is supposed to be indeterminism. One way to express this view is to negate all of the attributes of determinism. Indeterminism would deny laws, explanations, predictions, understanding of the world, or even discovery of trends or patterns in the world. Causality also goes out in this theory. There can be no causal relationships between causes and effects. In short, the world is characterized by chance and randomness.

This view does not in any way provide for freedom. If, for example, you wanted to walk across the room, there is no guarantee that you will make it or that the room will even be there when you get to the other side. Similarly, if your decisions do not arise in any way out of character or personality, your actions become as bizarre and unpredictable to you as they are to other people, and you cannot do what you want. Random or chance

the unfree actions are caused by events or circumstances external to me.⁵

I would agree with this idea but qualify it in one way. Stace and others have supposed that freedom is an all or nothing proposition: that one either has complete freedom or no freedom at all. It is supposedly similar to determinations in a court of law. The finding is guilty or not guilty. People are free or unfree. The real situation is much more complex. In every act that we perform, there are a variety of different factors that bear on us. Some of them may limit our options and choices. Others may increase our options. As long as a person is alive, I believe that no one, no matter how constraining the circumstances, is completely unfree. I am not sure that I can say, however, what it would mean to be completely unfree. On the other hand, I am also confident that no one is completely without any constraints or in other words completely free. Freedom then is always a matter of degrees.

Given this fact, there are a number of qualifications which need to be made on the statement that free acts are those which have internal causes and unfree acts are those which have external causes.

1. Internality does not guarantee freedom. It is clear that a person with compulsions or psychoses or neuroses is not as free as a person without such compulsions.

2. Some people have supposed that freedom makes no sense even if an act is internally caused because they have mistakenly concluded that if a person does a certain thing, then that person could not have done otherwise. Or, to complicate the argument a little further, if a person did what he wanted to do, so that he could have done otherwise if he had wanted to, he could not have wanted to do otherwise than he did. The mistake in such argumentation arises in at least two ways: one logical

and one numerical. First, it does not follow logically or metaphysically that because a person does one thing he *could not* have done otherwise. It only follows that he *did not do otherwise*. "Could" is a disposition word. The only way to show that one could not have done otherwise would be to show that the person had or has only *one* disposition. This would be an empirical claim, however, and not a logical one.

I would suggest that it is patently false that a person has only one disposition or reason for acting at any time. The usual situation is that several different acts are "over-determined." In other words there are adequate causal circumstances for me to act in several different ways. Right now I have some reasons to raise my hand or to shout or to sit down. I hold these reasons with different strengths, and some of them are opposed by contrary reasons which I can decide to overrule or not. One and the same person can perform an act of a certain sort from many different dispositions or reasons, and other people can perform such an act for very different reasons.

3. Another common suggestion is that if one traces chains of causation far enough, they will all originate externally, and all acts are therefore unfree. For example, the fact that I am here has something to do with choices and decisions made by my parents even before I was conceived or born. The mere fact that all causation ultimately can be traced outside of the person does not negate the possibility of some degree of freedom in my view, however. It does become important to see how long and in what way these chains of causation have been within the person in order to see to what extent he is free or unfree.

This brings me to a consideration of some of the factors that affect the amount of freedom a person has. All of these factors can be arranged by degrees on a continuum (as can the degree of freedom). I wish to claim, for example, that the more experience or knowledge a person has, the freer the person is. A child is not as free as an adult. Even though the child is free to run in front of an automobile, this act may be the last free act the child does. An adult, knowing what automobiles can do to people, knowing the consequences of certain acts and wishing to avoid those consequences so that range of action remains open, chooses not to run in front of cars. Likewise, knowing which kinds of things may be hot and avoiding touching them opens to the person of experience other options and ensures the avoidance of undesirable and unanticipated pain. In general, one hopes that education—the acquiring of knowledge—will enable people to learn what things cause what and with what consequences.

Another important factor is time. If one is driving carefully down the road at reasonable or safe speeds and a child runs into the path of the car from behind an object obscuring one's vision and the amount of time between when one sees the child and collides with the child is so short that no evasive action can be taken, then one is not free to have avoided the child. However if the child runs onto the roadway far down the road, one then has an opportunity to stop, drive around the child, or pursue

many other different alternatives. One important difference in the two cases is the amount of time to consider the alternatives and take appropriate action. Time is in fact so important that it is viewed as the key factor in courts of law in determining whether a person can be charged with first-degree murder.

Other important factors are imagination and certain relatively external factors such as socio-economic circumstances, health, climate, and so on. In general, as all such factors increase, so does freedom. As the degree of freedom increases so also does the degree of responsibility. As Moritz Schlick in an excellent article some time ago suggested, this may be the most important correlation of all.⁶

A major objection to this view of freedom, as already pointed out, is the observation that eventually all causes are external. This is explicitly true in orthodox Catholic-Protestant theology. The assumption is made that God is the creator of all, that this creation is *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) and that as a consequence God is the one and only necessary being. A necessary being is a being who *could not* not exist, who must exist, who did not come into existence and who cannot go out of existence. All other persons or beings are contingent. They *could* not exist; they did come into existence and could—if God desired—go out of existence.

It is very difficult to make sense of freedom within this theological tradition. If God has made or created me, then the arena for choice is determined by God as is my constitution. These two factors suggest such strong *external* constraints that it is not surprising that predestination ideas are ever present in this tradition. If God knows everything by being outside of time, then my entire future is determined by God's knowledge of what is true. I am in no sense free nor do I really have a capacity for free choice.⁷

Mormons do not believe in an *ex nihilo* creation. Technically, they do not even believe in a creation. Rather, they believe in God's organizing work, his ordering of co-existing elements under some constraints determined by these very elements. Each individual is thus a *necessary being* in some sense, a being who has not come into existence and cannot ever go out of existence. The sense that beings are contingent, may cease to exist, provides a rationale to the deep philosophical anxiety that existentialists feel about life. The death of a contingent being may represent the complete and total annihilation of existence. If one rejects this crucial existential assumption, as Mormons do, the vaunted existential dread slinks into the corner and under careful examination melts away.

In addition, each individual possesses certain crucial characteristics. Joseph Smith taught, "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth was not created or made, neither indeed can be." (D&C 93:29.) B.H. Roberts emphasized the implications of this view when he wrote about our beginnings as intelligences: ". . . intelligences . . . are not created or made . . . for they are eternal—eternal as God the Father, and God the Son are."⁸ Roberts further observes that these intelligences are "endowed as they are with free will. . ."⁹ Roberts summarizes some of the properties of

these individual intelligences as "immortal," "self-existent," "uncreated," and "eternal as God is."¹⁰

The best account of intelligences I know of is in Roberts's *The Seventy's Course in Theology*. Such entities, Roberts says in the second year manual, must be "self-conscious" or having the power to "distinguish himself from other things—the 'me' from the 'not me.'" In addition Roberts says such entities must have "the power of deliberation" and the power "to form a judgment that this or that is a better thing or state than this or that."¹¹ In the fourth year of this same course on theology, Roberts adds one more very important quality: intelligences have the power of volition. "Intelligence, as embodied in man, is also conscious of the power, within certain limitations, to will, and to perform what he wills to do." Furthermore, "having deliberated . . . he [an individual intelligence] has the power to choose between them. . . . So that volition, within certain limitations at least, seems also to be a quality of Intelligence."¹² The Book of Moses suggests that all of the above described traits require some knowledge because when spirits were made to give the intelligences an additional arena for action, Enoch was told that the intelligences were each given "their knowledge."¹³ (Pearl of Great Price, Moses 7:32.) Such views are given credence by the King Follett discourse of Joseph Smith, now carefully presented in the several different accounts of diarists in *The Words of Joseph Smith*.¹⁴

Individuals then are not simply a product of their genetic inheritance and their environment. There is a part of a person that did *not* originate *externally*, whose causes ever were and are *internal* to the person. Mormonism thus enables us to make an important distinction. We can define "free agency" as the inherent capacity to make choices. Mormon theology teaches that free agency itself is co-eternal, necessary, and indestructibly always a part of a person. It is in no sense "given," even by God. In his excellent article, Marden Clark is right when he says that Satan's plan was no real alternative.¹⁵

If free agency is the capacity to make choices, then freedom describes the making of them, the circumstances and the consequences of the decisions made. The degree of freedom possible is also enhanced within the Mormon scheme of things. It may be an egregious mistake to talk of free agency being "given" to man. But certain enabling capacities such as a spirit body and a mortal body were in some sense "given" to man in order to provide for additional opportunities for freedom. In addition, there is the assumption of an eternality of experience and substantial knowledge that goes beyond this mortal life. If the suggestion made earlier was correct that as knowledge increases so also does freedom, then this enlarges freedom in Mormon thought. Also, if time is a key factor in reasoned deliberations and if intelligences have had an eternality of time, then freedom and with it responsibility are awesome and unavoidable.

Having described in broad outlines the main issues in this very old debate, we can draw these consequences. Most people do believe in determinism in the sense in

which I described it. There is nothing in determinism which precludes our believing in freedom. In fact freedom requires determinism. Our common feeling that we are free is vindicated to some extent by the observation that it is compatible with determinism. The position I have been describing is technically called soft-determinism. Even though all actions are caused, some of them are caused by us in ways that we can describe as more or less depending on the factors or circumstances that go into the acts. Furthermore, in order to assess praise or blame or responsibility, we need to know a lot about the causal history of the person who does the act. How long have the causes been within the agent and in what way are critical aspects of that causal history. Mormon theology is not only consistent with this view of freedom and determinism but in fact maximizes the freedom and hence the responsibility possible in such a system.

Notes

1. I have in mind as an example Alvin Plantinga's paper "The Free Will Defence" in *The Philosophy of Religion* edited by Basil Mitchell (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).
2. *Responsibility* by Jonathan Glover, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970) p. 21.
3. See my 1980 Sunstone symposium paper, "Is God the Creator of Natural & Moral Laws."
4. See my 1979 Sunstone symposium paper "Time and Omniscience in Mormon Theology," in *Sunstone* 5:17-23. Sometimes foreordination is described in a way that makes it sound similar to predestination. In order to provide for human freedom, it is extremely important to distinguish between these two ideas. The important difference is that no one must accept any obligation or responsibility even if they are foreordained to it. Acceptance is voluntary, and it is conditioned on principles of righteousness which themselves assume real choices and volition.
5. In "The Problem of Free Will," *Religion and the Modern Mind* by W.T. Stace (J.B. Lippincott Co., 1952).
6. In *Problems of Ethics* by Moritz Schlick, (New York: Dover Publications, 1939). The specific chapter is entitled "When is a Man Responsible," pp. 143-158.
7. My "Time and Omniscience in Mormon Theology." There is also a useful article on the difference between "Free Agency" and "Freedom" in Garth L. Mangum's "Free Agency and Freedom—Some Misconceptions" in *Dialogue* 1 (1966). The best explanation of these matters is Sterling McMurrin's *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965).
8. In *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, 1903, p. 100.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
11. *The Seventy's Course in Theology* was published five successive years from 1907-1911 (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News). See the Second Year, p. 8.
12. *Seventy's Course*, Fourth Year, p. 4.
13. *Pearl of Great Price*, Moses 7:32.
14. Compiled and edited by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, and published by the Religious Studies Center, (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1980), pp. 340-362.
15. See "Some Implications of Human Freedom," published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5 (1970): 47-57. The word "create" is used somewhat loosely in the article but there are many excellent points.