

The fear of error is error itself. –Hegel

PERFECTION: A SOCIAL CRITICISM AND A THEOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVE

By John Durham Peters

ASK ANY MORMON FOR THE ORIGIN OF THE MORMON quest for perfection and he or she will point to Jesus' exhortation. "Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father in which is in heaven is perfect." If Matthew 5:48 did not exist we would invent it. However, the LDS quest for perfection bows down to strange gods, and often clashes with the radical and inspiring aspects of its theology. Further, our common ideal of perfection is not equivalent to the godliness Jesus was exhorting us to seek in that verse.

"PERFECTION" AND ITS MEANINGS

What do we mean by perfection? The answer is not simply theological but also linguistic. It is a commonplace that in the time of King James, "perfect" meant "complete or fulfilled." Sometimes it is also noted that the original Greek word means "complete" or "the state of having attained one's ordained end" (*telos*). Usually any linguistic discussion ends there, 350 years too soon. We need to consider the directions the word has taken since. For our obsession with perfection is arguably in part an accident of the history of the English language.

There are two major shifts in the concept of perfection since King James and, in fact, since Joseph Smith. The first shift was brought about by mass production, which defined perfection not in terms of excellence but absence of flaw. A "perfect" product was one whose imperfections did not exceed a predetermined level. Ironically, "quality control" came to mean the control of mistakes.¹ *Flawlessness* overtook and absorbed any remaining sense of *completeness* that "perfection" had; the word came to be defined in terms of deficiencies rather than qualities. In addition, the word acquired a sense of *finality*, since a product whose flaws had been minimized was essentially complete, a latent meaning in the original Greek. By "finality," I mean the idea that a perfect thing cannot grow or change. This notion abounds in current usage. For instance, *The Sesame Street Dictionary*, a trustworthy guide to trends in American culture, pithily defines "perfect" as

follows: "When something is perfect, it cannot be better."

The second significant shift of meaning also came from a late nineteenth-century movement—social Darwinism. Social Darwinism turned the meaning of *perfectionism* inside out by shifting the homeland of perfection from social groups to select individuals. In Joseph Smith's day, "perfectionism" was a utopian faith in the ultimate improvability of society, in the salvation of society as a whole. Joseph shared this faith with his age. Half a century later, social Darwinism glorified perfectible individuals—those who were "fit" to survive—while the rest were left to perish. Creating the perfect society thus took on a potentially brutal aspect. With this shift in emphasis, "perfectionism" gradually came to mean the obsession with details, especially flawed ones. Today, the title *perfectionist* refers not to one's beliefs about the destiny of society but to a person's high demands and intolerance for error.

Since most Mormons belong to the English-speaking community, their words are subject to the broader shifts of meaning found in the larger society; nevertheless, if we are not sensitive to what is happening to the words we prize, we may find our religious life and discourse infiltrated by meanings foreign to it. For example, what is a "perfect family?" The opening sentence of a recent popular story in *Family Circle* defines this concept well: "Everybody said the Caldwells were a perfect family: attractive, bright, charming, social, athletic." Which of these beautiful-people values have anything to do with godliness? Another example: What is a "perfect mother?" Similarly, this has little to do with godliness and everything to do with social pressure and bread-baking. Since "perfection" potently symbolizes everything we could hope to be, a Mormon woman can feel her failure to be a "perfect mother" with real fear and trembling. She suffers for refusing to let her soul be mass-produced. Social convention thus demands payment in the currency of religious remorse—thinking that humanity is a sin.

PERFECTION IN PRACTICE

Self-culture is the chief arm of Mormon perfectionism. I use this blanket term to cover a wide variety of practices centering on

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the self-cultivating, monitoring, controlling, introspecting, or disciplining, for instance. Such practices are incredibly diverse in Mormonism, including goal-setting, journal-keeping, and introspection. They also show up in less tangible ways—in our speech, relationships, and ways of thinking. These practices are essentially moved by a spirit of discipline; they aim to get the self to *behave*, to conform and comply. As French thinker Michel Foucault has shown, self-culture is an old and important part of the Western cultural tradition²; it is not a uniquely Mormon phenomenon, though it does take uniquely Mormon forms.

How do self-culture and perfectionism fit together? They are

not necessarily the same. You can be devoted to self-cultivation without holding any idea of eventual perfection. But together they make a potent and recurring combination, both in and out of Mormonism. Perhaps their most archetypal union is in the person of Benjamin Franklin. His achievement was to found what could be called an enterprise approach to goodness, which combined perfectionist self-culture and capitalism. In his youth, Franklin devised a scheme of moral accounting. We all know about his failure to attain perfection in thirteen weeks, even while aided with a clever system of moral accounting. (His journal in this period was essentially a

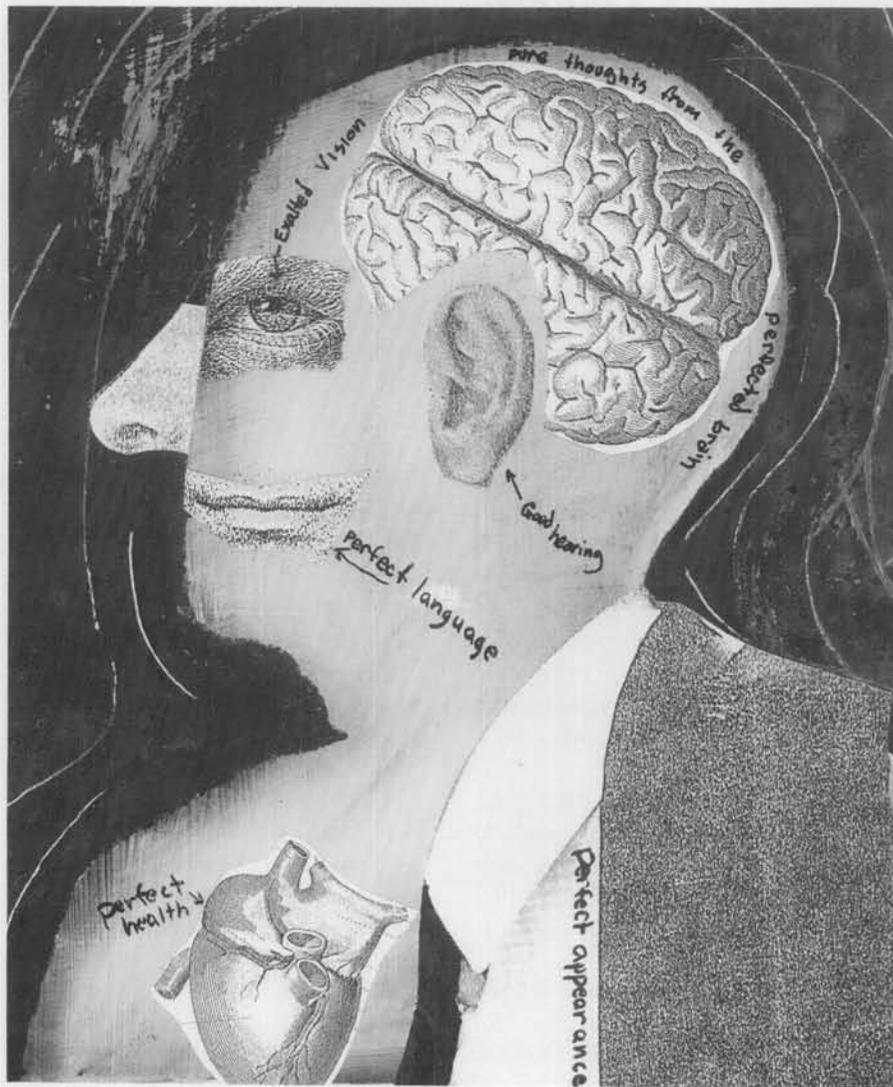
ledger: business applied to the soul.) The motives for his perfectionism were candidly this-worldly: to create the character and self-discipline that would bring success in business. Ever since, the quest for perfection has had overtones of "success."

The important thing about this episode is the mix of business and spirituality so characteristic of American and contemporary Mormon culture. The images and ideas of management abound in our spiritual life, from "spiritual inventories" to goal-setting (a practice equally at home in the corporate board room or the

teachers quorum). A survey of the Mormon landscape reveals a flourishing perfection industry, with all manner of self-improvement guides to spiritual and monetary enrichment. When an ambitious Mormon invents a new way to improve the soul, he rushes out to consult with California business execs or makes "motivational" tapes to be sold at appropriately pumped-up prices.

We need to understand the deeper reasons for this combination of business and religion; we have to get at the psychology of the perfection-seeker. Max Weber, the great German sociologist, has painted its classic portrait in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit*

of Capitalism. The argument goes roughly like this: The archetypal Protestant (who we Mormons resemble in many ways) finds himself in a universe in which his worth is in jeopardy: is he one of the chosen or one of the damned? This uncertainty creates extraordinary anxiety. Trying to learn his status, the Protestant turns to two activities, introspection and acquisition. In introspection, the Protestant searches his experience for signs and feelings of divine favor, thus making self-culture a key part of the quest for existential confirmation. Similarly, the Protestant's furious business enterprise—driven by his anxiety—ends up creating a world that embodies the hoped-



for signs of election, thus banishing all doubts.

Though these two quests seem radically distinct, they are united at a deeper level: the search for recognition, for reassurance of worth. Wealth serves as a balm for spiritual anxiety. It seems to answer the question, "Does God look upon me with favor?" with material evidence. It is important to note that the Protestant does not seek wealth for its own sake but as a token of recognition, as an assurance that his place in the universe is secure. Bearing this in mind, it's easier to see the link between

self-culture and business: they are the inner and outer forms of the search for existential security.

The intimate connection of present Mormon culture with the spirit of capitalism (and with what one might call the body of capitalism) is well known. It is crucial for us to understand what this mixture means for our conceptions of perfection. First, Mormon perfectionism is motivated by anxiety about worth. The perfectionist's ticket to the universe is in danger of being revoked if he or she fails. Flaws terrorize the perfectionist: what must be overcome to feel saved? Second, we tend to seek pathways to perfection that are susceptible to being recognized, whether by others or ourselves. This follows from the idea that recognition (from God) is what we need to resolve our anxiety about our worth.

SOME CRITICISMS OF PERFECTIONISM

The Protestant faces an essentially epistemological problem: how to know who is righteous. This is a universal problem in religious cultures that value righteousness, since it does not seem susceptible to mere human judgment. There are several ways to get around this problem. Two have already been mentioned: *Self-culture*, which can be used to create a doubt-free inner environment, and *wealth*. While wealth may or may not be a sign of divine approval, it always signifies social approval; the traps here are obvious. A third means of knowing righteousness is *collusion*. Instead of waiting for the winds of the spirit that whisper we are God's children, we set up social systems in which we provide recognition for one another. A danger with such systems is elitism. The fourth means is *legalism*. As the Pharisees appear in the New Testament, they had made righteousness into respectability, with a fail-safe system that provides sure knowledge of their own goodness. Their laws are so precise and minute that no question can exist about who belongs to the country club of the righteous. Those who conform, belong; those who don't, don't.

I don't wish to overplay the differences between these practices. They occur in various combinations, and all work to overcome the difficult problem of how to know one's own righteousness. All occur in Mormon life. I would like to develop these criticisms more fully, working from least to most important. The focus of my critique will be self-culture.

First, self-culture captures only that part of our behavior which is visible from the inside. The amount of our own behavior that we can experience is limited, as anyone who has been audio or videotaped knows. We are partisan and partial observers of our own actions. More profoundly, self-culture is ahistorical, especially when it takes the form of introspection. It takes snap-shots rather than movies and at best sees behavior only on its way out. Setting aside the thorny question of what makes an action good, it is nonetheless clear that an action's fruits are an important part of its ultimate meaning. The fruits of an action are unpredictable; they may take days, months, or years to ripen. As American philosopher C.S. Peirce pointed out, meaning belongs to the future.³ This indeterminacy is due to the fact that all

actions take place in concert with the actions of other people and different times. I might get angry at my son, but my apology will teach him that although passions are real (and an important part of being human), love is stronger. Apparent sin at one moment blurs into blessing in the next. The diligent missionary knows implicitly that all his efforts are fundamentally indeterminate: some few "seeds" may one day bring forth a hundredfold.

By contrast, a dominant trait of contemporary Mormon self-culture is its *dailiness*. This is like trying to tell time with the second hand of the watch. Some extreme forms of Mormon perfectionism resemble aphasia, in their inability to integrate minute signs of growth into a larger whole. Perhaps this explains the quest for the elusive "big picture" among more disciplined perfectionists; the big picture is precisely what such a daily regimen rules out. Daily labor of course is indispensable for growth, but daily measurement of that growth is not. Faith is precisely what is needed.

Second, self-culture objectifies righteousness. By identifying and monitoring certain behaviors, one is willy-nilly in the business of knowing and passing judgment on the states of one's own soul. I have nothing against self-knowledge or self-improvement; but the quest for any kind of knowledge of one's own righteousness is the perennial trap for cultures of righteousness like ours, because *genuine righteousness never knows itself*. True righteousness is an epistemological black hole. It has built-in limits to self-reflection. One can know for sure if one is forgiven; such knowledge, as Mormon says (see Moroni 7 and 8), leads to meekness and lowliness of heart. While one can have sure knowledge of the operations of *grace*, the ultimate judgment of *works* is not the business of morals. First of all, we're not epistemologically equipped. Second, we don't need such knowledge: the idea of personal goodness has no reality to the meek and lowly; they know that all their righteousness is nothing but filthy rags. Of course, the fruits of a just life are real and powerful, but these are like winged joys that fly by and can never be hoarded or cultivated for their own sake, for then they die.

Carlyle once noted that "the healthy know not of their health, but only the sick." His comment might also apply to the quest for righteousness.⁴ Righteousness can be inspected only when it is flawed. As soon as we start to be concerned for our own goodness, we can be sure that disease has set in; the concern is itself a symptom of the disease. Moreover, since all we see is our sick soul, the quest for perfection seems more and more like a tormenting downward spiral.

A common Protestant response says depraved beings like us are always spiritually ill and in need of perpetual monitoring. I don't think this a compelling answer for Mormon theology. Instead, one powerful theme our theology shares with Christianity as a whole is the idea that the judgment of personal goodness is solely God's business.

Finally, self-culture makes the self the basis of goodness. It often leads to what we call, in a wondrously descriptive term, *self-righteousness*. The zealous self-cultivator can become a connoisseur of his own goodness, a righteousness Narcissus. By contrast, Jesus taught that none is good but God. Goodness

gathered inward may begin to stink like hoarded manna; goodness's homeland is the community. "He that gathers has little; he that sows abroad has much."

Righteousness can thus be both divine and dangerous. The scriptures repeat this message insistently. The Book of Mormon can be read as a catalog of righteousness gone berserk. It is much harder (occasional Nephite racism aside) on the Nephites than the Lamanites. The Nephite quest for righteousness cyclically turns into pride. The Lamanites, in contrast, must contend with passion. Passion can destroy, to be sure, but pride prefers large-scale operations: it specializes in holy wars, witch-hunts and inquisitions. Crimes of passion are crimes against social order, while crimes of pride are crimes against life. Chesterton says best what I have in mind: "When vices run wild, chaos reigns; when virtues run wild, catastrophe reigns."

A central message of the prophetic books of the Old Testament, of the New Testament and the Book of Mormon is, to put it strikingly, *the badness of goodness*. Goodness can be toxic in the wrong place or quantity. With too much of it, you cease to be able to tell the bad kinds of good apart from the good kinds. If someone is a "bad" ("baaad") musician or athlete, she is good: she knocks you off your feet and transgresses conventional ways of playing. If someone is "goody-goody," he is bad—obsequious, apple-polishing, and so on. Children who are too "good" worry parents; some spunk is called for.

In other words, the scriptures teach that everyone must repent, especially the righteous. Perfectionism, with its zeal to eliminate all flaws, runs the risk of ending up with goody-goody goodness and self-righteousness. When one diligently shuns all that is bad in a perfectionist quest for flawlessness, one can no longer cope with the full, flawed world as a whole. Two main paths follow from this quest, one militant and one passive. The militant approach, whose epitome is Nazism, seeks to rid the world of imperfections by whatever means necessary. Nazism took the perfectibility of mankind to an extreme, but chillingly logical conclusion: human beings are the main sources of chaos and imperfection, and death is the only perfect and flawless thing.⁵ The second approach, though less sinister, is still potentially crippling: it removes imperfections not from the world but from our experience thereof. Ignorance, not violence, is its weapon. It occasionally takes such forms as book-burnings or tirades against "humanism," but its preferred mode of operation is blithe middle-class ignorance. The quest for flawlessness can thus culminate in a spiritual provincialism, when the quest for purity of behavior turns into a quest for purity of experience.

In these two responses we see how far perfection can lead away from godliness. The world is full of suffering, oppression, violence, and hunger. To turn away in the name of one's spiritual quest is to take a different course than God's. His love for all his children, all scattered throughout the universe in varying stages of development, binds him intimately to them. He weeps with them in their suffering (see Moses 7: 28-40). His connecting love for his children provides him with every possible kind of experience, above and below all things, even though his behavior is flawless. Scripture calls this experiencing love "succor." If we take

seriously the idea of God's ongoing parentage, the universe will never lack being in need of succor. Anguish is forever. The fact that behavioral perfection does not rule out anguish and wrenching experience is most fully expressed in the Atonement, in which we see the Spotless One voluntarily assuming the suffering of the whole human family.

FRUITFULNESS

The understanding that God so fully abounds in good that he has power to descend to all depths, I believe, points toward a more robust and healthy way of thinking than perfection. This alternative to perfection I call "fruitfulness." The term recalls Jesus' parables, the tree of life, Lehi's Dream, and Alma 32, central human experiences such as the birth of children and creativity, and the distinctive Mormon idea of "eternal increase." Fruitfulness consists of several interlocking ideas which have been implicit thus far; its central idea is that goodness is more a matter of abundance than that of austerity. I would like to mention a few points from Mormon theology which illustrate such an idea, focusing on the notion of "eternal increase," which I understand to mean reproduction throughout the eternities. These points offer possibilities to explore—hypotheses—rather than fully elaborated ideas.

The first point is the genuineness of novelty, and hence of time, both in this world and in those beyond. Classically, time has been seen as the opposite of eternity: the one subject to change and decay, the other immutable and everlasting. The Mormon vision rearranges the elements in this opposition. The eternities are dynamic and changing, yet know no death. Birth instead is the engine of time for the spheres beyond. Birth and death have traditionally been clumped together as if there was a necessary connection between them. In mortality, they seem naturally linked, but there is no necessary reason why this link should hold in the beyond. Mormon thought dissolves the apparent unity of "whatever is born, begotten, or dies," by positing endless increase. Hence change, time, and growth are no mere illusions given to befuddle or test mortals, but are ongoing. As Sir Richard Burton observed in his *City of the Saints* after his visit to Salt Lake City in 1859, "The Mormons are like the Pythagoreans in their procreation, transmigration, and exaltation of souls . . . They take no leap in the dark; they spring from this sublunary stage into a known, not an unknown world."⁶

The second point is the continuation into the eternities of that same manner of sociality enjoyed on earth (D&C 130:2). Put concretely, this means the eternal validity of conversation. Conversation is a form of association by which we gain knowledge of other intelligences. Through it, we come to understand what other independent, creative beings are making of their experience. The knowable universe consists of matter and meanings. Since each intelligence is independent to act for itself, and that action is essentially creative, the birth of new intelligences alters "things as they are." William James puts it well: "the cosmos is in some degree, however slight, made structurally different by every act of ours that takes place in it."⁷ The essence of intelligent

life is to be creative—that is, to change the structure of the universe, both matter and meaning.

This point suggests at least two things. First, that the eternities are filled with variety. Nothing could be more alien to Mormon thought than an eternity spent amidst crystalline Platonic forms; no static vision satisfies the Mormon thirst for industry, work, and creation. Second, that knowledge of the meaningful universe can never be complete or finished. As long as intelligent beings are acting and creating, the realm of meanings will never be finished. Hence divine experience will necessarily be open to change and flux, even if informational knowledge about the present state of matter (“objective reality”) is complete. This point needs more development than I can give it here, but it follows from the notion of eternal increase. It presents us with a positive, fruitful image of what divine experience might be like, an image we can profitably emulate here.

Third is the continuation of social bonds. The idea of eternal increase countenances none of the distinctions so dear to perfectionism, such as those between self and others, or self and works. It seems to think of the increase in one’s intelligence and one’s posterity as somehow equivalent or parallel. As long as individuals live together in love, no final end-point for growth need exist. By virtue of being eternally connected to a growing species, the possibilities for individual growth (the only real growth) will equal that of the entire species. What arts, civilizations, literatures, sports, musics, adventures could an entire species of intelligent beings create if they had sufficient time and resources? In such a universe, each individual might indeed be flawless, in never desiring or doing wrong, but this would be a mere prerequisite to membership in that order. For instance, an eternal Bach might become technically flawless as a musician, but as a composer, there is no reason to imagine an end to his creativity and exploration. So with our eternal lives. The idea that perfection is a final state comes from looking only at the side of the fulfillment of law, not of the creation of goodness. Because some beings attain perfect harmony with the order of the universe does not mean any end to their works or their fruits. And since our “self” is ultimately inseparable from our works and from other people, individual growth continues in the midst of all perfection. Thus to talk of God as “perfect” seems to praise the least of his attributes, rather than his mercy, bounty, and majesty. Indeed, a recent Bible translation has Matthew 5:48 as follows: “There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father’s goodness knows no bounds.” (New English Bible)

This vision underlies what I understand by words like “consecration” and “Zion.” The model it presents is one of *growing perfection*; that is, *fruitfulness*. In my opinion, this offers us a more humane and more divine image of how we ought to live and for what we ought to strive.

CONCLUSION

A powerful and original ideal in Mormon theology is the ideal of fruitfulness. The images of man, God, existence and experience it offers show us that we need not drain this world of vitality in

the name of some crystalline, static perfection. Perfection is an inadequate guide for human experience. Nor does it seem to fit Mormon theology’s vision of the eternities. It seems a mutation, a throwback, a remnant of former days of theological captivity. It doesn’t fit either our experience or our vision, then we ought to abandon it. Abandoning it may of course be easier said than done, due to its pervasiveness in current Mormon culture. Societies have ways of creating ideas in their own image; perfection may indeed fit the experience and vision of many people. But we can salvage the feelings and energy it occupies and find more worthy causes for them; we needn’t throw out the baby with the bathwater. We ought to recapture the symbols and practices conducive to fruitfulness. Such symbols were evidently on the minds of the builders of the Salt Lake Temple when they decorated the Celestial Room with fruits and flowers multiplying in wild profusion. They seemed to have thought that fruitfulness, fertility, and variety were the distinctive features of a celestial life. The spotless, crystalline decor in recent temples reminds one of the importance of purity, but still scatters rainbows to those who look for them. We need to look for the rainbows among the crystal and give them more material form than in our imagination.

NOTES:

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1. See Daniel Boorstin’s *The Americans*: vol. 3, *The Democratic Experience*, 1973, pp 193-200.
2. See Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, (New York: Vintage 1987). See also Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1978), esp. pp. 56ff which is very informative on the history of self-culture in America.
3. For instance, see C.S. Peirce, “The Issues of Pragmatism,” in his *Collected Papers*, vol. 5, Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, ed., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), pp. 293-313.
4. Thomas Carlyle, quoted in Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1978.
5. See, e.g., Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) pp. 73-78.
6. Sir Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California*, F. M. Brodie, ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963) p. 443. First published 1861.
7. William James, “Report on Mrs. Piper’s Hodgson-Control,” in *William James on Psychical Research*, ed. and compiled by Gardner Murphy and Robert O. Ballou (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961) p. 208.