

Materialism and the Mormon Faith

Max Nolan

IN HIS LANDMARK STUDY OF EARLY MORMON ECONOMIC LIFE, *Great Basin Kingdom*, Leonard J. Arrington observed:

Joseph Smith and other early Mormon leaders seem to have seen every part of life, and every problem put to them, as part of an integrated universe in which materialities and immaterialities were all of equal standing, or indistinguishable in God's kingdom. Religion was relevant to economics, politics, art and science. If Christianity was "the most avowedly materialist of all the great religions," as asserted by William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Mormonism came near to being the most avowedly materialist of all the Christian religions. (1966, 6)

Arrington's observation focuses on Mormon materialism in its broadest sweep, but I will confine my attention to its metaphysical aspect, which derives its authority from Doctrine and Covenants 131:7-8: "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine and pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes. We cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter."

The materialist character of the Mormon religion, in its historical context, is highly unusual. As Sterling M. McMurrin pointed out in his pathbreaking work, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*: "An interesting and important facet of the Mormon conception of reality is the materialism that is defended so consistently and emphatically by Mormon writers. From very early times materialism has been found in both oriental and occidental thought, but its appearance within the framework of theistic philosophy is quite uncommon" (1965, 5).

This interest is compounded by the fact that, in both Western and Eastern civilizations, materialist doctrines have usually been associated with distinctively anti-religious points of view. Leslie Stephen, for one, noted in his *History*

MAX NOLAN is a B.A. philosophy honors graduate of the University of Western Australia and works for the Ministry of Education in Western Australia. A version of this essay was presented at the Mormon History Association annual meeting in Provo, Utah, May 1984.

of *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*: "I need not enquire how far it is possible to combine materialism and theism without an absolute contradiction. Historically speaking, the two doctrines are naturally opposed. Materialism and atheism are the final expression of a reaction against the attempt to frame a philosophy by rising into a supernatural world" (1927, 1:65).

The Carvaka materialism of ancient India offers an illustration. Although most of what we know of it comes through its enemies and critics, there can be no doubt that the proponents of this heterodox system of Indian philosophy combined a thoroughgoing materialism with an aggressive attack on religious beliefs of the day.¹ In the Western world, the first-century Roman poet, Lucretius, in spite of occasional perfunctory references to the gods, offered scathing criticism of religious belief and espoused a system of atomistic materialism that dispensed with any need for divine agency. In eighteenth-century France, we find the Encyclopediasts, particularly the German-born Baron Paul D'Holbach, whose best-remembered book today is *The System of Nature*, known by some as the "bible of the atheists." In it, he "sought to give a foundation for his atheism, and it proved to be the paradigm of materialistic philosophy in the eighteenth century" (Pecharroman 1977, 17).

Notwithstanding this historic tendency for materialist thought to be anti-religious, I find evidence of a few rare exceptions. There is the third-century Latin theologian Tertullian, a vigorous Christian conservative, fiercely critical of Hellenistic intellectualism and anything remotely pagan, and ever associated with the famous phrase, "I believe because it is impossible." In seventeenth-century England the philosopher Thomas Hobbes maintained an uncompromising materialist view of existence while retaining assent to Christian belief.² Most notable, perhaps, was the eighteenth-century Englishman Joseph Priestley, a versatile scientist and nonconformist theologian/clergyman, who boldly proclaimed a metaphysical materialism. As one commentator has pointed out,

Priestley's characteristic method of defending "Christianity" was to expose and remove its "corruptions," which for him included everything considered by the orthodox to be its very essence. The notion of the soul as a substance distinct from the body, he continues, was "part of the system of heathenism, and was from thence introduced into Christianity which has derived the greatest part of its corruptions from this source." This thought . . . furnishes the main clue to his advocacy of materialism. (Willey 1962, 168-69)

Interesting as these exceptions may be, the arresting thing about Joseph Smith is that he described himself as more than a mere commentator on the

¹ The Carvaka attitude towards religious belief is summarized by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore in their anthology of Indian philosophical texts: "The soul is only the body qualified by intelligence. It has no existence apart from the body. . . . The postulates of religion, God, freedom and immortality are illusions. Nature is indifferent to good and evil, and history does not bear witness to Divine Providence. Pleasure and pain are the central facts of life. Virtue and vice are not absolute values but mere social conventions" (1957, 227).

² The genuineness of Hobbes's religious convictions has been denied in the past, an opinion which still has considerable sway today. However, Peter Geach (1981) has argued convincingly, I believe, for the sincerity of Hobbes's religious beliefs.

scriptures — he claimed to be in prophetic communication with God, a transmitting medium for new scripture. The fact that he established so vital a religious community, which has flourished over time and has been the subject of critical study, indicates a need to examine more seriously his theistic materialism — one of the few such belief systems that has met with any lasting interest.

MORMON DOCTRINE AND TRADITIONAL MATERIALISM

In an entry on materialism in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Keith Campbell writes: “Materialism is the name given to a family of doctrines concerning the nature of the world which give matter a primary position and accord to mind (or spirit) a secondary reality or even none at all. Extreme materialism asserts that the real world consists of material things, varying in their states and relations, and nothing else” (Edwards 1967, 5:179).

The denial of immaterial matter (overlooking the trite observation that it is a contradiction in terms) is the denial that there exists any substance other than matter. Since in Mormonism spirit is defined as material, albeit of a more subtle character than the tangible objects around us, it appears that the metaphysical materialism expressed in Doctrine and Covenants 131:7–8 is akin to the extreme materialism described by Campbell above. However, I believe that a more careful consideration of materialist doctrine and its ramifications, on the one hand, and the other doctrinal commitments of Mormonism, on the other hand, must lead to a more careful definition of the ontological commitment of the Mormon faith.

In this essay I will concentrate on five important affirmations in Mormonism as they relate to the question of materialism: (1) the survival of the individual after death; (2) freedom of the will; (3) the existence of intuitive knowledge as distinct from sensory perception; (4) the reality of the miraculous; and (5) the eternal nature of intelligence.

Immortality

Few ideas are more pervasive in the history of religion than the immortality of the soul — the notion that in one way or another the individual will survive the death of the mortal body. In contrast, materialists through the ages have emphasized human mortality, believing that there is ultimately no difference between mind (or soul) and body. This point of view may have been most succinctly stated by the Baron Paul D’Holbach, who declared: “An organized being may be compared to a clock, which, once broken, is no longer suitable for the use to which it was designed. To say that the soul shall feel, shall think, shall enjoy, shall suffer, after the death of the body, is to pretend that a clock, shivered into a thousand pieces, will continue to strike the hour, and have the faculty of marking the progress of time” (1970, 119).

Hobbes and Priestley shared the classic Christian conviction of a literal resurrection of the body. However, their views of what actually happens at death are quite indistinguishable from those of the anti-religious materialists. For Hobbes and Priestley, death is the literal extinction of the entire individual,

which logically follows from their materialist view of the human being. Whatever resurrection may occur, for them, is discontinuous with mortal existence.

Tertullian, on the other hand, assumes the continuance of the individual beyond death and through to the resurrection of the body — a position less obviously consistent with a materialist point of view.

The Mormon position appears at first glance even less consistent with any kind of materialist philosophy. Its vigorous belief in personal immortality is easily deduced from Mormon practices, such as temple rites and genealogical activity; more important, the Church's foundation is based on the reported appearances of Jesus Christ and biblical figures such as the apostles Peter, James, and John. But Mormonism further distinguishes its materialism by boldly declaring the individual's existence *before* birth — a juxtaposition of beliefs that a D'Holbach would find absolutely incredible.

Historically, the association between materialism and what might be called immortalism is so rare as to justify great caution in determining the precise nature of Mormon materialism. A materialism which allows eternal life in the face of the common-sense experience of death and bodily dissolution seems to imply a view of matter considerably more pliant than is usually associated with materialist metaphysics — an issue to which I will return later in this essay.

Free Will

The question of free will is another area where I find a telling divergence between Mormonism and traditional forms of materialism, due to radically different assumptions about human nature. A classic materialist statement would be the maxim of Thomas Hobbes, “Nothing taketh a beginning from itself,” which reflects the hardline determinism so characteristic of materialist systems.

Since humans are as much an object in nature as anything else, in this view, they are as completely determined in thought and behavior as are less complex objects in nature. An early twentieth-century advocate of materialism, Hugh Elliot, stated that “if we knew the precise disposition at any moment of all the energy existing in the Universe, and the direction of motion of every moving particle, and if we were armed with a mathematics of infinite power, we should be able to prophesy the exact disposition of all the matter and energy in the Universe at any future time” (in Randall, Buchler, and Shirk 1957, 307).

Elliot went on to declare that any being who possessed such powers, and who in the distant past had acquired “absolute knowledge at some moment of the nebula from which the solar system arose,” would have been able to predict the future existence of Hugh Elliot, his authorship of *Modern Science and Materialism* (from which I quote), and the readers of that book as well as the particular emotions stirred in them as they read his book. This grandiose claim seems typical of nineteenth-century materialists, who seem to have recognized and accepted its negative implications for free will.

Hobbes's dictum that “nothing taketh a beginning from itself” is directly contrary to important ideas in Joseph Smith's teachings. The basic scriptural

source for Mormon thought on this topic is Doctrine and Covenants 93:29: "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created, neither indeed can be." Joseph Smith expanded this idea further in his King Follett discourse:

I take my ring from my finger and liken it unto the mind of man . . . the immortal part, because it has no beginning. Suppose you cut it in two, then it has a beginning and an end; but join it again, and it continues one eternal round. So it is with the spirit of man. As the Lord liveth, if it had a beginning it will have an end. All the fools and learned and wise men from the beginning of creation, who say that the spirit of man had a beginning, prove that it must have an end; and if that doctrine is true, then the doctrine of annihilation would be true. But if I am right, I might with boldness proclaim from the housetops that God never had the power to create the spirit of man at all. (JD 6:6-7)

This concept of human beings as uncreated intelligences carries extraordinarily potent implications about human freedom that are the antithesis of materialist views of human nature.

Interestingly, both Hobbes and Priestley dismissed the notion of free will; indeed, Priestley saw it as incompatible with God's omniscience, a position similar to that of contemporary defenders of Mormon finitist theology (see Robson 1980). Priestley, however, rejected free will and retained an absolute conception of divine omniscience; Mormon defenders of finitist theology retain free will while arguing for a significantly modified concept of divine omniscience.⁸

Sensory vs. Intuitive Perception

A third area of divergence between Mormon and traditional materialism is in the field of epistemology, or theory of knowledge. Materialist epistemology has typically defined the limits of human knowledge within sensory perception only. In his *The System of Nature*, the Baron D'Holbach quotes with approval Aristotle's dictum that "nothing enters the mind of man, but through the medium of his senses" (1970, 79). Elaborating on this, D'Holbach adds: "For any man to think on that which has not acted on any of his senses, is to think on words; it is a dream of sounds, it is to seek in his own imagination for objects to which he can attach his wandering ideas" (p. 84).

Although Mormon epistemology lacks formal definition or systemization, it is evident that its breadth of scope contrasts strikingly with theories of knowledge generally associated with metaphysical materialism. Also it is probably not without significance that the only materialist-type epistemology in the Book of Mormon actually comes from the lips of the anti-Christ figure Korihor. Dismissing the prophetic claims of the believers (and, incidentally, the doctrine of life after death), Korihor argues, "How do ye know of their surety? Behold, ye cannot know of things which ye do not see; therefore ye cannot know that there shall be a Christ" (Alma 30:15). The Mormon reliance on

⁸ Inherent in modern Mormonism is a tension between absolutist and finitist understandings of important theological beliefs. Among the General Authorities who advocate absolutism in a philosophically attuned way, Elder Neal A. Maxwell appears to be foremost; Kent Robson (1980) responds to his position on the issue discussed here.

prophetic experience as a mode of knowing, and in particular the role of the Holy Ghost in acquiring religious truth, puts Mormon epistemology well beyond the pale of other materialist theories of knowledge.

In his analysis of Mormon theological foundations, Sterling McMurrin remarks that Mormonism “exhibits sensory empirical leanings in its references to revelation” (1965, 5), an observation that brings to mind William James’s description of Joseph Smith’s revelatory experiences as “predominantly sensorial” (1962, 461). However, while many of the foundational revelatory experiences of Joseph Smith and others were sensory in character, these experiences were not necessarily accessible to all present in the revelatory situation. For example, on 16 February 1832 Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon experienced for about one hour what the Prophet termed “a vision of the glories” in the house of John Johnson in Hiram, Ohio, resulting in the writing of Doctrine and Covenants 76. This revelation records the experience as both visual and auditory, but apparently none of the twelve other elders present at the time were privy to the actual sensations experienced by Joseph and Sidney.

Such experiences do appear to be of a different class than the common run of sensory experiences, by virtue of their not completely public character. This need not disturb Latter-day Saints, since the Mormon canon is replete with admonitions setting certain conditions upon participation in theophanous experiences.⁴ This transcendence of ordinary sense experience is, however, just the sort of thing that is roundly condemned by conventional materialist views, which leads me to conclude that the admission of intuitive modes of knowing above ordinary sense perceptions markedly distinguishes Mormonism from traditional materialism.

The Reality of the Miraculous

In his 1925 introduction to Frederick Albert Lange’s monumental *History of Materialism*, Bertrand Russell remarked that one of the two essential dogmas of materialism is the reign of law (p. ix; the other is the claim that all that exists is material). For classical materialism, regarded as the legitimate philosophical counterpart to the scientific point of view,⁵ the scientific principle of

⁴ See, for example, Matthew 5:8 (“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God”); Hebrews 12:14 (“Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord”); Ether 4:11 (“But he that believeth these things which I have spoken, him will I visit with the manifestations of my Spirit, and he shall know and bear record. For because of my Spirit he shall know that these things are true; for it persuadeth men to do good”); and D&C 76: 114–16,

But great and marvelous are the works of the Lord, and the mysteries of his kingdom which he showed unto us, which surpass all understanding in glory, and in might, and in dominion;

Which he commanded us we should not write while we were yet in the Spirit, and are not lawful for man to utter;

Neither is man capable to make them known, for they are only to be seen and understood by the power of the Holy Spirit, which God bestows on those who love him, and purify themselves before him.

⁵ According to Keith Campbell,

The enduring appeal of materialism arises from its alliance with those sciences which have contributed most to our understanding of the world we live in. Investiga-

unexceptionable uniformities in nature is seen as the vanquisher of miraculous phenomena, and in turn of religions based on such phenomena. Writing from the perspective of nineteenth-century German materialism, the radical biblical critic David Strauss gave trenchant expression to this attitude when he declared:

When the narration is irreconcilable with the known and universal laws which govern the cause of all events. . . . When therefore we meet with an account of certain phenomena or events of which it is expressly stated or implied that they were produced immediately by God himself (divine apparitions . . . voices from heaven and the like), or by human beings possessed of supernatural powers (miracles, prophecies), such an account is *in so far* to be considered as not historical. (1973, 87-88)

On the contrary, Mormonism is replete with belief in the miraculous, notably Joseph Smith's visions and his ability to translate the unknown tongue in which the Book of Mormon was written. There is also an unqualified belief in miracles related in the Bible: for early Latter-day Saints, the waters of the Red Sea truly parted for Moses and his people; Jesus truly multiplied loaves and fishes and turned water into wine. These convictions remain an integral part of mainstream Mormonism today.

However, Mormon expositors insist that the miraculous in no way infringes upon natural law. In his 1899 work *The Articles of Faith*, for example, Elder James E. Talmage wrote: "Miracles are commonly regarded as occurrences in opposition to laws of nature. Such a conception is plainly erroneous, for the laws of nature are inviolable. However, as human understanding of these laws is at best imperfect, events strictly in accordance with natural law may appear contrary thereto" (1975, 229).

Another way of stating this point of view was suggested by Sterling McMurrin, who wrote, "From the perspective of God there are no miracles" (1965, 2). This echoes Brigham Young's assertion, "There is no miracle to any being in the heavens or on the earth, only to the ignorant. To a man who understands the philosophy of all the phenomena that transpire, there is no such thing as a miracle" (JD 13:33).

This aspect of Mormonism could indicate a naturalistic concept of the miraculous, an outlook seemingly consistent with a materialist ontology; Mormon thought is, in fact, sometimes described as having a naturalistic thrust (O'Dea 1957, 233). But this description strains the term "naturalistic," particularly as it can be applied to a work such as Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*. The word is applied in this case precisely because Brodie's book rejects all elements of the supernatural in the Joseph Smith story. On the other hand, exponents of the mainline Mormon view fully accept these elements as the pivotal features of the Prophet's life. I believe that "naturalistic"

tions in the physical sciences have a materialist methodology; that is, they attempt to explain a class of phenomena by appeal to physical conditions alone. The claim of materialists is that there is no subject matter which cannot be adequately treated with a materialist methodology. This claim cannot be established by any scientific investigation; it can be established, if at all, only by critical reflection on the whole range of human thought and experience. (in Edwards 1967, 178)

applies to Mormonism because it assumes an ultimate, natural explanation for everything. However, this does not lead Church members to assume that Jesus didn't turn water to wine, multiply loaves and fishes, or visit Joseph Smith in a vision, and this is exactly the difference between the naturalism of a Fawn Brodie and that of a James Talmage.⁶

Just as Mormon epistemology allows a much more expansive outlook than does conventional materialism, so is Mormonism's view of nature much more expansive. The supernatural is alive and well in the classic Mormon view of things and is simply at the opposite end of the spectrum from everyday experience. Such a continuity in the order of being is undoubtedly as much a matter of faith as is Mormonism's belief in what is conventionally called the supernatural.

The Eternal Nature of Intelligence

While one may argue that at least several of the Mormon affirmations discussed above can be reconciled with a materialist view of reality, the most cogent and interesting challenge to Mormonism as a consistent system of metaphysical materialism is the doctrine of eternal intelligence. This concept is, of course, found in the Mormon canon: "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created, neither indeed can be" (D&C 93:29).

It is critical that we understand the meaning of the term "intelligence" in this doctrinal statement. Thomas G. Alexander, in his article "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," comments on the historical danger of superimposing on an expression used in the past a meaning that may not have been current at that time: "Today, we interpret the term intelligence in those passages to mean the essential uncreated essence of each person. The passage, however, discusses intelligence as 'the light of truth,' which it declares eternal, and not the premortal essence of each person" (1980, 33).

Alexander further observes that the May 1834 issue of the *Evening and Morning Star* "uses the term intelligence to mean facts or information." While this latter observation is undoubtedly correct, it doesn't necessarily follow that this is the meaning of "intelligence" in Doctrine and Covenants 93:29. The compact edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, makes it clear that "intelligence" had a number of different significations in Joseph Smith's day.

Moreover, Joseph Smith's own use of the word varied considerably. In a discourse attributed to the Prophet in June 1839, he distinctly refers to intelligence not as a body of facts or information but as a revelatory experience. The Holy Ghost, he said, has "no other effect than pure intelligence," a mind-expanding experience in which "the whole soul and body are only exercised by the pure spirit of intelligence." In the same discourse he is recorded as say-

⁶ Writing of "supernatural" elements in the Joseph Smith story is certainly a delicate matter for modern LDS historians committed to both their faith and the integrity of their academic endeavors, since the elements of which I write elude the grasp of modern historiographic enquiry.

ing, "A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you *feel* pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas" (HC 3:379–81; emphasis added). These words unequivocally refer to intelligence as a subjective or psychic experience — or, to use an appropriate meaning given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "The action or fact of mentally apprehending something" (1:1456).

The term "intelligence" appears more often in the King Follett discourse than in any other of Joseph Smith's known discourses. I maintain that it is primarily equated in that discourse with the human *mind* (JD 6:1–11).

I would suggest that in Doctrine and Covenants 93:29 "intelligence" means nothing less than the human ability to comprehend or perceive: the very subject of that verse is humankind. "Man was also in the beginning with God" is followed immediately by "Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created, neither indeed can be." Certainly this statement on intelligence is not the introduction to a new subject, but rather a development of the preceding sentence. This understanding of the passage is also, I believe, consonant with the use of "intelligence" in the much later King Follett discourse. In the context of this scriptural passage, "intelligence, or the light of truth" refers not to "facts or opinion" but to humans as percipient, experiencing individuals.

This interpretation seems to have been shared by Joseph Smith's contemporary and colleague in the Church, Orson Pratt. In his essay, "Absurdities of Immaterialism," Pratt carefully drew out the materialist aspects of Mormonism and indeed boldly identified them as materialism. Nevertheless, he disavowed some of the generally accepted implications of metaphysical materialism, in particular the idea that intelligence is a byproduct of material or physical processes: "No doubt but that the immaterialist absurdity was invented principally to combat the gross errors which have been embraced by some materialists, both of ancient and modern times. The great majority of materialists have contended that thought and feeling are the *results* of organization, beginning and ceasing with it" (Burnett and Pope 1976, 18).

As Orson Pratt well understood, matter was perceived in classical materialism as inert, purely mechanical; intelligence and associated phenomena were merely the temporary consequence of certain highly complex configurations of material particles. Pratt expressly disagreed with such a view, and I do not doubt that his view reflects the interpretation of Doctrine and Covenants 93:29 that I have suggested here.

The radical conflict between this traditional materialist view and the Mormon doctrine of eternal intelligence creates a chasm between the two. Materialism, whether defined as meaning that all that exists is material, or more liberally, that all that exists *at least* depends on the material for its existence, seems to rule out in either case the possibility of intelligence or sentience as a self-existing principle. This is a critical issue in view of the declaration in Doctrine and Covenants 131:7–8 that spirit is material in essence. The heart of the matter is, *what is the relationship between spirit and intelligence in Mormon theology?*

It seems unlikely that early Mormon thinkers believed that thoughts and feelings are reducible to brain states — a view that is a logical consequence of identifying intelligence with materiality. Mormon metaphysics are fairly extroverted: they do not include the kind of speculative probing into the nature of self and awareness that characterizes Eastern religions, for example. Nevertheless, rather than attribute to Mormonism the stark reductionism of the major forms of materialism, it would perhaps be truer to say that the real materialism of Mormon metaphysics lies in a conviction that all centers of intelligence and sentience in the universe are structured throughout the very real matrix of space and time. This would be more in tune with a religion which allows for the individual's existence through the eternities, for genuine human freedom, for the miraculous, and for a relatively unconstrained view of the ways of knowing. An archetypal materialist like Paul D'Holbach might well complain that Mormonism's materialism is merely verbal and paraphrase to his own end Orson Pratt's critique of immaterialist concepts of religion.

DEFINING MORMON METAPHYSICS: MATERIALISM, IDEALISM, AND PROCESS PHILOSOPHY

Since Mormonism is so much at variance with traditional materialism, its concept of the nature of matter becomes an interesting and vital question. As noted earlier, Mormon materialism seems to imply a considerably more pliant view of matter than that usually associated with materialistic metaphysics. The absence of a formal definition in canonical literature and the lack of a vigorous philosophical life in the Mormon community have left this a curiously neglected issue. Paul M. Edwards rightly noted some time ago, in his stimulating essay "The Secular Smiths," that there are a "bevy of questions which cry for answers" in Mormon theology and history, including "What is intelligence? How does soul material differ from all other materials in the theology of Mormonism?" (1977, 5).

Could it be that the key to the ontological commitment expressed in Doctrine and Covenants 131:7-8 lies in the peculiarly Hebraic character of Mormon attitudes to things material? The same attitude expressed in Genesis towards the creation is faithfully reflected in Mormon attitudes and beliefs: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was *very* good" (Gen. 1:30; cf. Moses 2:31). Huston Smith's remarks in his *The Religions of Man* are worth noting here:

One specific element in the Biblical account . . . deserves special notice; namely, its estimate of nature, the physical component of things.

Much of Greek thought, notably that dominated by Plato and Plotinus, takes a dim view of matter. In Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism the basic outlook is optimistic in spite of the material world rather than because of it. In India matter tends to be regarded as a barbarian, spoiling everything she touches. Liberation ultimately lies in extricating spirit from its material environment.

How different from the first chapter of Genesis, which opens, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" and builds from there to its climax in which "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was *very* good." Let the reader dwell for a moment on the wonderful little word "*very*." It gives a lilt to the entire

religion. Pressing for meaning in every direction, the Jews refused to abandon the physical aspects of life as illusory, defective or unimportant. Fresh as the morning of Creation, they were to be relished with zest. (1958, 239)

Such remarks seem remarkably appropriate for Mormon values and beliefs as well.

Thus we may better understand the commitment to matter as constituting reality, expressed in Doctrine and Covenants 131:7–8, not as a reductive materialism but as an affirmation that the material world of our experience is at the heart of reality no matter *how* reality is understood. Certainly Joseph Smith perceived the diversity and color and vibrancy of this world as something woven into the very warp and woof of reality. This perception receives dramatic form in the boundless optimism of such Mormon doctrines as eternal progression and increase, the multiplicity of heavenly kingdoms, and the definition of the celestial kingdom as a perfected earth.

In *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, Sterling McMurrin notes, “It is typical of a materialist metaphysics, as for instance that of the pre-Socratic atomistic philosopher Democritus, to hold that matter is essentially lifeless and inert and that the motions of matter are due to external mechanical causes” (1965, 7). In contrast, McMurrin comments that the Mormon concept of matter “is essentially dynamic rather than static, if indeed it is not a kind of living energy . . . subject to the rule of intelligence” (p. 77). Such a conception of Mormon materialism — one which allows the pre-eminence of intelligence — is more compatible with Mormon beliefs in general than is the kind of reductionism to which I have referred.

It is interesting to consider these questions within the larger context of historic Christianity, which has almost universally adhered to the traditional sharp bifurcation between the nature of spirit and matter. There is reason to believe that even early Mormonism assumed such a bifurcation; the Book of Mormon in particular shows no evident departure from the traditional dichotomy of spirit and matter. And, as I indicated earlier in this essay, the epistemic aspects of this scripture appear to conflict with the presumptions of historic materialist theories of knowledge. Likewise, the *Lectures on Faith* (assuming they reflect Joseph Smith’s views) seem to imply a traditionalist view of spirit and matter.

Gradually, as Joseph Smith’s revelations emerged in the Doctrine and Covenants and in his later discourses, clear references to a materialist view became apparent. This materialism therefore must be seen as a part of the new corpus of teaching revealed through the Prophet in the course of his career.

The most sustained attempt to philosophically explicate this materialist metaphysics came from Orson Pratt. Departing significantly from traditional materialism, Pratt used Joseph Smith’s teachings on the eternal nature of intelligence to reject the notion that intelligence is a temporary effect of organized (inert) matter. However, according to Pratt, intelligence, although eternal in its own right, is not ontologically distinct from matter but rather is intrinsic to it. This position is in effect panpsychic, admitting intelligence is copresent with materiality in *all* its manifestations, although in varying degrees.

While Orson Pratt's detailed explanation of Mormon metaphysical materialism never gained general acceptance in the Church, the fundamental philosophical assertions of the founding prophet remain, providing a continuing challenge to Mormonism to creatively synthesize all aspects of such a distinctive religious system. But in the search for such a synthesis, must the Mormon position be enmeshed in the age-old rivalry between materialism and idealism? Classic materialism, denying as it does the possibility of irreducible intelligence, is incompatible with Mormonism; classic idealism, with its denial of the reality of the material, likewise conflicts with Mormon doctrine. Neither of these options can adequately account for the inherent qualities of Mormon doctrine.

Looking past this traditional split, I find a potential answer in recent discussions of Mormon theology that are evocative of process philosophy, the modern philosophical movement that recognizes the primacy of change in its attempt to resolve the fundamental metaphysical question of what there is. The most striking element in Mormon theology and process theology alike (as exemplified in the work of the British/American philosopher A. N. Whitehead) is the idea that Deity itself is subject to process. In the Mormon context, this daring doctrine was most explicitly detailed in the King Follett discourse and is epitomized in Lorenzo Snow's familiar aphorism, "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may become." Closely related to this doctrine is the absence of absolutism and the sheer pluralism in Mormon metaphysics: the material constituents of the world, and the intelligences embodied in the world, are uncreated and co-eternal with Deity.

Such a metaphysics, with its continuing upward thrust towards the attainment of godhood, exalts the reality and positiveness of change and appears to be perfectly in accord with the tenor of process philosophy. Parallels such as these are certainly of the greatest interest to Latter-day Saints committed to a philosophically literate articulation and defense of the metaphysical foundations of their faith.⁷

Process philosophy is also relevant to the central issue of this essay — the ontological commitment of the Mormon faith. It answers the question of whether the Mormon position need be assimilated to either materialism or idealism. Clearly, the answer is *neither*. Process philosophy seeks a conceptual understanding of reality that casts aside the reductive limitations of both materialism and idealism. To use Alfred North Whitehead's terminology, these viewpoints both commit the fallacy of "misplaced concreteness," identifying the real with what is essentially an abstraction. Reality is much more dynamic than either and is best summed up in the immensely suggestive metaphor of process. Mormon doctrine, with elements that elude both philosophies, encompasses a broader spectrum than either materialism or idealism allows.

The open texture of process philosophy seems therefore to offer a useful way to approach the question of the Mormon metaphysical commitment.

⁷ Recent articles that have begun exploring parallels between Mormon theology and process philosophy include Ostler (1984); Ross (1982); and Tickemyer (1984).

Orson Pratt's valiant attempt to reconcile the Mormon doctrines of materialism and the eternal nature of intelligence led him to espouse a panpsychic solution. Process philosophy, with its emphasis on the unity and dynamism of existence, has similarly tried to reconcile the divergent features of human experience and thought.⁸ It is therefore encouraging to note the growing attention of Mormon scholars in recent years to this modern philosophical movement, one which holds potential insights in developing a contemporary understanding of the implications of Mormon ontology.

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⁸ Panpsychism, in one form or another, has a pedigree that reaches back as far as the early Greeks and includes distinguished figures from many periods. American philosopher Charles Hartshorne is currently perhaps its most outstanding advocate.

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Rag rug, sego lily design, Ada Jensen (Logan, Utah), 34" diameter, mixed fabrics, 1976; (Utah) State Art Collection.