Philosophical Christian Apology Meets "Rational" Mormon Theology[1]

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As Joseph Smith matured in his prophetic calling, he came to regard what he saw as the rational appeal of his developing theology as one of its chief virtues.[2] Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, this attitude continued to animate authoritative interpretations and defenses of Mormon doctrine offered by leading Mormon churchmen and intellectuals.[3] By way of example, early Mormon apostle Orson Pratt, perhaps better known as Professor Pratt than Elder Pratt to his Mormon contemporaries, employed Aquinean logic to guide and defend his theological innovations,[4] while unfavorably contrasting what he characterized as the logical absurdities of immaterialist Christian teachings about God and souls with the clear sensibility of the thoroughgoing materialism taught by Joseph Smith in the later years of

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1. This paper is adapted from chaps. 1 and 4 of my dissertation, "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology" (Harvard University, 1996). I thank my advisors, Professors Christine Korsgaard and Warren Goldfarb of the Harvard philosophy department, and Professor David Paulsen, of Brigham Young University, who read and reported on the dissertation to my committee. While in common usage the connotation of "apology" has come to include sheepish admission of some sort of failing, the venerable use to which I put the term in this essay signifies nothing of the sort: According to this older usage, apology is just defense of faith, whether sheepish or not.

2. See, e.g., Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 192; Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 204.

3. Throughout that time period, there was an appreciable intersection between intellecual and ecclesiastical leadership.

4. Orson Pratt, *Great First Cause, or the Self-Moving Forces of the Universe*, reprinted in *The Essential Orson Pratt*, foreword by David J. Whittaker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 173-197.

his ministry.[5] In 1914, future Apostle John A. Widtsoe published his popular and enduring *A Rational Theology*,[6] which continued in service as an instructional manual for decades. In 1931, Apostle James E. Talmage went so far as to defend geology and evolution in a public lecture delivered at the Mormon Tabernacle, in what would prove a vain attempt to stem the irrationalist (or at least anti-scientific) forces then gaining strength in Mormon leadership circles.[7]

As described below, these thinkers also championed various forms of rational apology, some shared in common with more orthodox forms of Christianity and others unique to Mormonism. While I respect and admire the naturalist and rationalist[8] impulses evident in the theological speculations of these thinkers, for reasons explained below I think that the coordinate effort to find a rational basis for belief in that theology does not succeed. I defend that conclusion in part by developing and accentuating relevant contrasts between Mormon and mainstream Christian ideology, and in part by making arguments which have negative implications for rationalist apologetics in any Christian context.

This essay is critical rather than constructive. But I do think that the Mormon tradition offers resources from which can be extracted a more promising approach to faith and its foundations, an approach with obvious affinities to Immanuel Kant's and William James's proposals.[9]

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5. Orson Pratt, *Absurdities of Immaterialism, or, A Reply to T. W. P. Taylder's Pamphlet, Entitled, "The Materialism of the Mormons or Latter-day Saints, Examined and Exposed,"* reprinted in *The Essential Orson Pratt*, 61-108.

6. Salt Lake City: Deseret News Publishing Co.

7. "The Earth and Man," reprinted in James P. Harris, ed., *The Essential James E. Talmage* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 241-55. However, Talmage's defense of evolution did not reach the claim that mankind had evolved. Further, it would be misleading to describe the first century of the church as a time of unbridled rationalism and free-thinking; e.g., Brigham Young instructed church members to destroy copies of certain Orson Pratt works in their possession (see Gary James Bergera, "The Orson Pratt-Brigham Young Controversies: Conflict Within the Quorums, 1853 to 1868," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13 [Summer 1980]: 37). Yet even during Young's heavy-handed reign, Pratt was able to retain his position in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and Young was happy to exploit Pratt's obvious capabilities by giving him such vitally important assignments as the first public announcement and defense of Mormon polygamy in 1852 (*Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. [London: F. D. Richards, 1854-86], 1:53-66, hereafter JD). In tandem with the church's manifest political and social alignment with the religious right since World War II, there has developed an irrationalist and anti-intellectual attitude, at least with regard to theological matters, which contrasts with the generally prevalent tenor of earlier years. These threads and their interrelations are explored in O. Kendall White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987).

8. As the conjunction of this term with "naturalism" perhaps makes clear, my use of "rationalism" and related terms in this paper connotes not opposition to empiricism, but rather the amenability of reality to human understanding.

9. My positive proposals can be found in chap. 4 of my dissertation, "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology."

Although I reject the rationalist arguments championed by central Mormon thinkers, my own views—theological as well as apologetic—are continuous with theirs on a still more fundamental level: mine are thoroughly informed by the central Mormon dogma of the essential likeness of man to God.

Doctrinal Essentials

The arguments advanced in this essay depend intimately on a doctrinal framework which seems increasingly open to challenge, so I think it worthwhile to preface my discussion of faith with a brief summary of relevant doctrinal presuppositions. In this essay I rely chiefly on two sources for doctrine. One is Joseph Smith's 1844 King Follett Discourse, the church founder's funeral oration for a prosperous Mormon stonemason named King Follett, in which are brought together a wide array of the Prophet's later teachings. The other is the corpus of B. H. Roberts (to whom informal surveys of living Mormon intellectuals conducted in 1969 and 1993 gave pride of place as the "most eminent intellectual. . .in Mormon history," the later survey by an even more convincing margin than the first).[10]

In recent decades the church has focused on what it has in common with more orthodox forms of Christianity and, correspondingly, on the Book of Mormon, which was completed in 1829 and is the most doctrinally orthodox of the documents unique to the Mormon canon. The brand of Mormonism to which I am most inclined, that which owes the most to the sources upon which I chiefly rely in this essay, retains its greatest influence in Mormon communities whose collective memory reaches to earlier times. Of course, even in newer areas the accepted doctrine overlaps considerably with the older notions, but there are some outright departures and, more noticeably, significant shifts in detail and emphasis.

For me the heart of Mormon heresy[11] resides in Lorenzo Snow's

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10. Stan Larson, "Intellectuals in Mormon History: An Update," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Fall 1993): 187-89. Roberts served as a general authority from 1888 until his death in 1933, during which time he produced a substantial body of work, including the five-volume *The Seventy's Course on Theology*, a priesthood instruction manual; *The Gospel*, a Sunday School instruction manual; the six-volume *Comprehensive History of the Church* (Roberts also compiled and edited the seven-volume *History of the Church*); *Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, arguably the most comprehensive and sophisticated defense of Mormon theology ever undertaken by a general authority; several other apologetic, historical, and biographical books; and numerous articles and pamphlets. For an overview of Roberts's life and accomplishments by the Mormon intellectual ranked fourth by the 1969 survey and third by the 1993 survey, see Sterling McMurrin's biographical essay prefacing Roberts's *Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

11. This "heresy" is much of what sets Mormonism apart, doctrinally speaking, from

couplet: "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be."[12] I understand this to mean that humanity and divinity are not only related as discrete points on a developmental line; rather, this kinship entails that God's current position in the universe resembles our own in fundamental ways. In the words of Joseph Smith, "God Himself who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a Man like unto one of yourselves—that is the great secret!"[13] Furthermore, God inhabits a universe not of his own making: "God himself had materials to organize the world out of chaos —chaotic matter—which is element and in which dwells all the glory. Element had an existence from the time he had."[14]

Smith's contemporaries and successors readily concluded that God is as powerless to subvert the laws governing eternally and independently existent element as he is to create or destroy it. In 1855 Apostle Parley Pratt (Orson Pratt's older brother) published *Key to the Science of Theology*, which like Widtsoe's *A Rational Theology* went through several editions and continued in use for decades after its first publication. In this book Pratt characterized the idea "that miracles are events which transpire contrary to the laws of nature" as a "popular error. . .of modern times," and insisted that "[i]f such is the fact, then, there never has been a miracle, and there never will be one."[15] Almost without exception, Mormon scholars who have considered the matter concur,[16] insisting upon naturalistic accounts of even the greatest miracles of the Christian tradition. Regarding the creation, Widtsoe said: "Latter-day Saints are inclined to hold that forces about us, known in part through common human experience, especially in the field of physical science, were employed in the formation of the earth."[17] President Spencer W. Kimball elaborated this point more recently, in a fashion refreshingly reminiscent

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other religions claiming Judeo-Christian ancestry. As a general matter, I find Mormonism at its best when at its most heretical.

12. Clyde J. Williams, ed., *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 1.

13. Larson, "King Follett Discourse," 200. Note that Larson and all of the original sources report Joseph Smith characterizing God as a man, *simpliciter*, not an *exalted* man, per the commonly used (Grimshaw) amalgamation of those sources (see Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook, compilers, *The Words of Joseph Smith* [Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Co., 1991], 341, 344, 349, 357).

14. Larson, "King Follett Discourse," 203.

15. Parley Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons Co., 1891), 104.

16. See, e.g., James E. Talmage's highly influential *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), 200-2. Not surprisingly, Bruce R. McConkie appears to be an outlier on this issue; see his (also influential, though less so, I think, on this score) *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 506.

17. John Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 150.

of earlier Mormon figures, teaching that knowledge of every science, including physics, botany, biology and a host of others, will be required before we can organize worlds of our own.[18]

Parley Pratt characterized the Biblical account of the creation of Adam and Eve as an infantile myth that Moses, who knew better, foisted on his followers because they were unable to "receive [God's] heavenly laws or bide his presence":

> Thus the holy man was forced again to veil the past in mystery, and in the beginning of his history assign to man an earthly origin.
>
> Man, moulded from the earth as a brick.
>
> Woman, manufactured from a rib.
>
> Thus, parents still would fain conceal from budding manhood the mysteries of procreation, or the sources of life's ever-flowing river, by relating some childish tale of new-born life, engendered in the hollow trunk of some old tree, or springing with spontaneous growth like mushrooms from out the heaps of rubbish. O man! when wilt thou cease to be a child in knowledge?
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> Man, as we have said, is the offspring of Deity.[19]

Pratt intended his description of man as the offspring of deity to be taken quite literally. Similarly, in 1852 Brigham Young publicly offered a dismissive critique of the idea that Jesus was conceived through means other than procreative union:

> Now remember from this time forth, and forever, that Jesus Christ was not begotten by the Holy Ghost. I will repeat a little anecdote. I was in conversation with a certain learned professor upon this subject, when I replied, to this idea—"if the Son was begotten by the Holy Ghost, it would be very dangerous to baptize and confirm females, and give the Holy Ghost to them, lest he should beget children to be palmed upon the Elders by the people, bringing the Elders into great difficulties."[20]

While maintaining that Jesus was begotten of a virgin, Talmage still insisted that Jesus "was begotten of Elohim, the Eternal Father, not in violation of natural law but in accordance with a higher manifestation thereof."[21] The apparent driving thought is that natural laws bind and limit God himself; why else insist on the conformity of miracles to law?

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18. Spencer Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 53, 499.

19. Pratt, *Key to Theology*, 50-51.

20. JD 1:51.

21. James Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1982), 77. Talmage goes on to characterize Jesus as "the offspring from that association of supreme sanctity."

We are like the independently existing universe, operating according to its equally independent laws, in that we, too, self-exist:

> We say that God Himself is a self-existent God. Who told you so? It's correct enough, but how did it get into your heads? Who told you that man did not exist in like manner upon the same principle?. . .the mind of man—the intelligent part—is as immortal as, and is coequal with, God Himself.[22]

Together with the scriptural teaching with which it is regularly paired, that "[i]ntelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be" (D&C 93:29), this passage has been variously interpreted, but the only exposition ever to have been published with church sanction was Roberts's. According to Roberts, each of us has always [self-]existed as a discrete intelligence, now housed in a spirit body, which is in turn housed in our physical body.[23] At a minimum, as an intelligence each of us has always possessed self-consciousness, "the power to distinguish himself from other things—the 'me' from the 'not me'"; the power to deliberatively compare, "by which he sets over one thing against another"; and the "power of choosing one thing instead of another."[24]

As might be guessed from the description of intelligences housed in spirits, which are in turn housed in physical bodies, spirits are corporeal entities (D&C 131:7-8) that are "in the likeness" of our physical bodies (D&C 77:2). Incidentally, the import of D&C 131:7-8 appears to be that there are no immaterial entities, which entails that intelligences must be corporeal, too.

God was once "like one of us." God became a god, and we may become gods, "the same as all Gods have done—by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection." Our faithfulness before being born into this world earned us admission to this life, and if we are faithful in our present stewardship we, too, may become gods, rearing children of our own to mature divinity (Abraham 3:26-28). And when we are exalted and gain a kingdom, like Jesus we "will give it to the Father and it will . . .exalt His glory. . .so that He obtains kingdom rolling upon kingdom. . . .He will take a higher exaltation," as we take his present place.[25]

Religious faith appears to be the essential feature that distinguishes those exalted to divinity from the merely "honorable men [and women]

22. Larson, "King Follett Discourse," 203.

23. B. H. Roberts, "Immortality of Man," *Improvement Era* 10: 401-23, reprinted in *A Scrap Book* (Provo, Utah: Lynn Pulsipher, 1991), 2:26-28.

24. Ibid., 26.

25. Larson, "King Follett Discourse," 201.

of the earth" (D&C 76:75), who receive rewards that are pleasant enough, but do not become gods (D&C 76:50-80).

A Brief Survey of Mormon Apology

Over the centuries philosophers intent on proving the existence of God have generally offered arguments falling into three more or less standard categories: ontological, cosmological, and teleological or argument from design. For convenience I will often refer to each kind of argument in the definite singular. Of these, the ontological argument appears to have been entirely ignored in the Mormon tradition, and the cosmological argument paid little but noteworthy attention, while the teleological argument or argument from design has received noticeable patronage from both Mormon leaders and the membership at large.

Moral arguments, like Kant's, and voluntarist arguments, like Pascal's and James's, are virtually absent from the Mormon tradition. However, in addition to the argument from design, two distinctively Mormon patterns of argument figure prominently in the tradition. First is what I will call the argument from the Book of Mormon. This is basically a version of the argument from design that focuses on that book. In outline, the argument goes like this: One or more features of the Book of Mormon require(s) divine intervention to explain the existence of the book. The second distinctively Mormon argument, which I will call the argument from spiritual witness, characterizes some (generally pleasant) experience that occurs while being taught the Mormon gospel, or at some point after having prayed about it, as evidence of the truth of that gospel. Of the distinctively Mormon arguments, the argument from the Book of Mormon has received far more written attention, but I suspect that the other is the more influential of the two in the lives and thinking of the membership at large.

Against Rational Mormon Apologetics

Notwithstanding the conspicuously minimal role of the ontological and cosmological arguments in the Mormon tradition, I will begin my attack on rational Mormon apologetics by considering each of the standard arguments. I think this course is required by the generality of my assertions regarding rational Mormon apology; further, my discussion of the standard arguments underscores and illuminates some of the distinctive aspects of Mormon doctrine, and I simply think that emphasizing and highlighting Mormon departures from orthodoxy is a good thing. During the course of discussing the cosmological argument, I will give brief consideration to the prospects for Kant's moral argument in a Mormon setting. After the standard arguments, I will turn to the two arguments on behalf of religious belief which are more specifically Mormon (those from the Book of Mormon and from spiritual witness).

The Ontological Argument. As a first approximation, the ontological argument begins with God defined as completely perfect; coupling that initial defining premise with the postulate that to exist is better than not to exist, the argument concludes that God must exist: after all, if God did not exist, God could improve by existing (better to exist than not), and so would not be completely perfect but improvable.

Descartes captures one version of the ontological argument in his claim that it is self-contradictory to "think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a perfection)." God being defined as supremely perfect, and existence being regarded as a perfection, God must have existence; that is, God exists necessarily, since existence is inseparable from him.[26] In his *Proslogium*, Anselm uses God as shorthand for "that being greater than which none can be conceived"; given the apparent intelligibility of the definition, Anselm concludes that we have an idea of such a being and, therefore, that being exists at least in our minds.[27] Anselm takes it as obvious that existence both in the mind and in reality is greater than existence in the mind alone. On this basis Anselm concludes that the existence of God in our minds guarantees the existence of God in reality, as well: If what we conceived existed only in our minds, then that of which we are conceiving would not be God after all, because it would not be that being greater than which none can be conceived. Conversely, if we are indeed conceiving of God, that being greater than which none can be conceived, then we must conceive that the object of our conception exists in reality, as well. Accordingly the intelligibility of the characterization "that being greater than which none can be conceived" compels us to admit the existence of God both in the mind and also in reality.

Descartes's characterization of existence as a perfection and so, presumably, a predicate has been forcefully criticized by Kant (among others). Anselm's argument does not run afoul of the same sort of difficulties, but the system of degrees and kinds of existence required for Anselm's argument to work give rise to their own (substantial) problems. Suppose that these difficulties can be overcome; the argument still does nothing for Mormonism, any more than its failure, or even the outright falsity of its conclusion, would do anything to Mormonism.

Joseph Smith does ascribe self-existence to God,[28] and so we might properly describe the God of Mormonism as necessarily existent; but the

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26. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, tr. by John Cottingham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 46, 66.

27. The relevant portions of Anselm's *Proslogium*, in many translations, are available in many collections, including William Rowe and William Wainwright, compilers, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989).

28. Larson, "King Follet Discourse," 203.

necessary existence ascribed by Smith to God does not seem to be the sort of necessary existence required for the ontological argument, at least as made by Descartes, to work. The meaning and significance of this contention can be illustrated by considering a distinction John Hick draws between what he characterizes as *logically* necessary being and *factually* necessary being. For a thing to be possessed of logically necessary being, it must exist in such a way that existence cannot be denied to the thing without contradiction; for a thing to have factually necessary being, it must exist indestructibly, without beginning and without end, etc.; but while a factually necessarily existent being cannot *in fact* fail to exist, its non-existence is *logically* possible.[29] The necessary existence Joseph Smith ascribes to God seems much more like Hick's factually necessary than logically necessary existence: Smith attributes the same sort of self-existence to both God and humanity, and in ascribing self-existence to human beings, it appears that Smith means only that they can neither be created nor destroyed[30]; presumably, then, God's self-existence amounts to nothing more, and is a form of factually, rather than logically, necessary existence. Yet the ontological argument, at least Descartes's version, rests on the logical impossibility of denying God's existence; that is, if the ontological argument shows the existence of anything, it is of something having logically necessary existence, and so not the God of Mormon theology.

The Mormon doctrine that God has progressed in the past further weakens any apparent relation between the Mormon God and that being whose existence the ontological argument seeks to prove; unlike the preceding consideration, this cuts against Anselm's argument as strongly as Descartes's. If the ontological argument were sound now, it would (presumably) have been sound during that time before God came to be God. Before God came to be God, he was not completely perfect, so whatever being the ontological argument would have proven the existence of (if successful) would not be the God of Mormon theology. Presumably, the ontological argument would now still prove the existence of whatever being it would have proven the existence of before the Mormon God came to be a god, viz., some being other than the Mormon God.

The ontological argument's Mormon prospects get only bleaker if we follow those thinkers with whom I most closely sympathize on theological matters and suppose that God continues to progress[31]: A progressing

29. John Hick, "Necessary Being," reprinted in Rowe and Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion*, 13-14.

30. Larson, "King Follett Discourse," 203-4.

31. See, e.g., B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 476-78; *The Essential James E. Talmage*, 153-54; LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 271.

God surely cannot be the greatest conceivable being of the ontological argument. The God of the ontological argument simply is not the God of Mormon theology; either deity could exist instead of or even in addition to the other.

The Cosmological Argument. The best known form of cosmological argument goes under the name "first cause argument," which well conveys the essence of the argument to a broader audience. In rough form, the argument goes something like this: The things or events with which we are familiar come from, or must be caused by, something else, some prior things or events; yet this chain of cause-and-effect cannot go on forever, but must begin somewhere: This beginning point is the first cause, which is God. From that of which we are immediately aware, we infer the existence of God as the first, ultimate cause of what is more immediately known. Further, regarding this first, ultimate cause, we infer that it is somehow different from all the rest; if God were not somehow unique, then we would need some prior cause to explain *him* as well, and he would not be the first cause. Somehow, God must either be self-explaining or must need no explanation. Philosophers characterize this self-explaining/not-needing-explaining characteristic as necessity, and say that God is (and is as he is) necessarily.

The argument allows for many variations. To name but three, St. Thomas Aquinas presents versions of the argument centered on motion, causation, and existence. In each case, Aquinas concludes that the first in the relevant series (first mover, first cause, or necessary being) itself needs no explanation because it is as it is (moving, causing, or existing) necessarily.[32] This unmoved mover, first and uncaused cause, or necessarily existent being, as Aquinas puts it, is understood by everyone to be God. For present purposes, I think it useful to divide Aquinas's five "ways" of proving God's existence into categories. Aquinas's third way postulates God to explain the ontological fact of the existence of the universe; the other ways introduce God to render intelligible either how that universe behaves (the fifth way), or the fact that it behaves in any way at all, as opposed to remaining inert (ways one, two, and four). I begin by considering the cosmological argument positing God to explain the fact of existence rather than the nature thereof.

At a minimum, Mormons believe "in God, the Eternal Father, and in his son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost,"[33] each, according to

32. Like the relevant portions of Anselm's works, Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, Article 3, is available in multiple translations and multiple sources, including Rowe and Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion*.

33. See the First Article of Faith in the *Pearl of Great Price*.

Joseph Smith, a god.[34] Presumably the head of this triumvirate is the most plausible candidate for what those of Aquinas's acquaintance understand to be God. Yet Mormon cosmology describes the universe God inhabits as one filled with matter and other individuals with the same ontological status as God himself; God, accordingly, provides no better explanation for the rest of the universe than the universe can provide for itself. Indeed, Mormonism denies even more directly that the existence of its God *could* furnish the sort of explanation the cosmological argument introduces its God to provide, for the Mormon God is equally unable to create or destroy the matter or individuals with which he shares the universe.[35]

Of course, the preceding observations alone do not establish the irrelevance of cosmological arguments to the task of Mormon apology. Even though Mormon cosmology may neither require nor allow for an entity whose own *existence* is self-explanatory (or not in need of explanation) and which explains the *existence* of all else, it might still be proper to posit God to explain some other feature of the universe, e.g., the causal efficacy (the ability of things to cause other things) and Aristotelian motion (which is basically change of any sort) exhibited by the ontologically coeval entities of Mormon metaphysics (per Aquinas's first and second ways). So, assume for the moment that the intelligibility of the causal efficacy and motion of uncreated intelligences or matter requires appeal to something other than the intelligences or matter themselves. Consider, first, the case of matter. God came to be a god by working out his kingdom, earning his exaltation with fear and trembling under the tutelage of a god or gods of his own[36]; through this process, God *acquired* whatever control over matter that he has which we do not, and so his explanatory role is only intermediary—that is, the fact that his existence and capacities explain such attributes of matter is, in turn, explained by something else. Parallel reasoning underscores the derivative nature of whatever significance God may have in explaining the motive or causal capacities of other intelligent beings. Accordingly, the explanatory role of any of the recognized gods of Mormon theology for causal or motive attributes (or for *any*thing else) is at most local, not ultimate.

No god of Mormon theology is the explanation that needs no (other) explanation of the cosmological argument, and so whether or not the argument succeeds in demonstrating the existence of such a being—indeed whether or not such a being exists at all—has nothing to do with whether

34. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 370.

35. Larson, "King Follett Discourse," 203-4; D&C 93:29, 33; Abraham 3:18.

36. Larson, "King Follett Discourse," 201.

or not a Mormon god exists. While Aquinas might understand such a being to be God, Mormons do not.

Considerations parallel to those adduced with regard to the cosmological argument explain the inapplicability of Kant's moral argument to Mormon thought. Kant does not argue directly for the existence of God, but rather for our entitlement to believe there is a God. Kant argues that our obligation to pursue the highest good entitles us to believe it can be achieved, which in turn entitles us to believe in various religious dogmas, the truth of which would render the achievement of the highest good possible. One component of the highest good is happiness proportioned to morality. Blind natural law cannot, so the argument goes, be counted on to achieve this proportion, so we must believe there is a moral causality underlying nature and its laws which ensures that the system of nature does achieve this end.[37] However, Mormonism's God is part of nature, rather than a causality underlying it, so whatever the merits of Kant's moral argument in other contexts, it does nothing for Mormon apology. While Kant's specific argument may be of no use to the Mormon apologist, I find it a fruitful source of inspiration, and Kantian themes emerge in my own positive proposals.

Hume's writings on natural religion point the way to a more truly Mormon vision of the moral character of the universe and God's relation thereto.[38] Hume argues, through the character Philo in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, that the most plausible conclusion to draw about the moral character of whatever forces ultimately control the universe is that our moral standards do not matter to them.[39] Since the God of Mormon theology is not the force having ultimate control over the universe, this conclusion, like the cosmological argument, has no bearing on Mormon theology, but I think it compatible with broader Mormon cosmology: The generations of gods described by Mormon doctrine could be individuals who, finding the universe morally ambiguous or indifferent, aspire to develop and spread their own moral order throughout it.

Orson Pratt believed that the unoriginated substances of Mormon metaphysics are very small, material, intelligent entities out of which the individual beings and things of everyday experience are organized.[40]

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37. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, tr. by Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1956), 129/124, 129-30/125, 137/133.

38. Aspects of this vision are further developed in the "Theodicy" and "Faith" chapters of my dissertation, "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology," and surfaces in the conclusion to my "Determinist Mansions in the Mormon House?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 31 (Winter 1998): 141.

39. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980), 75.

40. *The Essential Orson Pratt*, 32-36.

Pratt's substances seem to be minute material versions of Leibnizian monads. Instructively, in striking recognition of the comparatively limited explanatory role played by the God of Mormon theology, Pratt characterized these unoriginated intelligent substances as the "Great First Cause," and, out of deference to the notion that God must be the source of all else, Pratt even went so far as to characterize the collection of these substances as God, instead of reserving that title for the particular being (particular collection of intelligent, unoriginated substances) who directed the organization of this world.[41] Brigham Young publicly repudiated Pratt's teachings on this and other points,[42] and I think it safe to say that Mormons almost without exception take themselves to worship a person, rather than Pratt's collective, but I think Pratt was quite right to insist that if there is a great first cause to be had in Mormon metaphysics (of which I am skeptical), it is not to be had in what Mormons generally think of as God.

In an argument apparently incorporating elements both of Aquinas's fourth way and Kant's moral argument, as well as the third and fourth of the *Lectures on Faith*, Roberts at one point argued that a human being's consciousness of her own imperfections leads her to postulate the existence of a God. Roberts reasoned that we are each aware that to varying degrees of imperfection we possess knowledge, truth, justice, mercy, righteousness, and love. Our consciousness of the imperfection attending our possession of these "mind qualities and soul powers. . .suggests the possibility of perfect love," etc. We accordingly postulate a being possessing these traits in their perfection, "in whom man may trust, in whom he may have faith, and flee to as a refuge." Roberts further concluded that without such a being, "the universe would be incomplete, utterly lacking in cohesion, without purpose, meaningless."[43] So far as I am aware, Roberts only made this argument in an *Improvement Era* article and did not incorporate it into any of his other works. While provocative, this single brief presentation does not elaborate the argument in detail sufficient to permit meaningful analysis.[44]

In that same article, Roberts argued that since "man cannot create life" or otherwise control its ebb and flow, we must "refer. . .to God" the

41. Ibid., 197.

42. James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 2:222-23; see also Bergera, "The Pratt-Young Controversies," 36-37.

43. B. H. Roberts, "Man's Need of God," *Improvement Era* 24: 811-17, reprinted in *A Scrap Book*, 2:3-10. Roberts makes this argument on pp. 5-8.

44. Put another way, following through and critiquing all of the possible interpretations left open by Roberts's provocative presentation would make this essay longer than what I might reasonably expect even an indulgent editor to permit.

power of creating, preserving, and ending life.[45] Talmage made a similar argument in *The Articles of Faith*.[46] In response I note, as before, that the Mormon God might serve as a local explanation of these things, but cannot be the ultimate source of such power because, having once been like us, he must have derived his power from yet another source.

The Argument from Design. The argument from design, or teleological argument, is often made by way of analogy. William Paley, perhaps the philosopher with whom the argument from design is most closely associated, illustrates this argument by considering the thoughts a person would have upon encountering a watch lying in a field. Paley contends that even a person who had never seen a watch, who was totally unfamiliar with how a watch was made, would conclude that the watch must have come from some intelligent source and could not have been produced by chance or blind natural processes. The reason for this conclusion would be the complexity manifested in the working together of the various parts of the watch to produce the movement of the hands, or—in a phrase popular among discussants of the argument—the curious adaptation of means to ends.[47] The world in which we live, the argument continues, contains countless instances of adaptation of means to ends far more remarkable than any watch; therefore, with even more propriety than our imaginary watch-finder, we conclude that the world and its contents had an intelligent designer.

The body of religious propositions derivable from such reasoning is sometimes called natural religion. In the course of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the classic philosophical critique of the argument from design, Hume's character Cleanthes gives this argument a formulation as clear and concise as any:

> Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again allow for subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human designs, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger

45. Roberts, "Man's Need of God," 5.

46. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 31.

47. William Paley, *Natural Theology* (London: Gilbert and Rivington, L. D., 1890), 9, 10-16.

> faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed.[48]

The wonders of nature exhibit engineering far beyond the capabilities of even the most skilled and clever human artisan, yet even the meager products of human design are too complex to have come into being without intelligent intervention; therefore, there must be some intelligent source (far more intelligent than any mere human) responsible for nature.

There are important variations on this general theme. At its most modest, the argument may be taken to posit intelligent design as a theory of the same order as organic evolution and natural selection. On this reading, the argument is simply that the generally accepted secular scientific account is less plausible than the hypothesis that some intelligent being orchestrated the wonders of nature. This version of the argument can fit much better with Mormon theology as laid out in this paper than either the ontological or cosmological arguments considered previously. This argument does not require an eternally (nor even presently) completely perfect being like the ontological argument, nor an explaining God that does not itself need explaining like the cosmological. A (possibly progressing) being who achieved his current position with help, and who utilizes his knowledge of natural laws and the services of children who respect and obey him to accomplish his designs, could fill the much more limited role of intelligent designer quite well.[49]

The argument from design may also be made as a cosmological argument, ill-suited to Mormon theology. To develop this version, I return first to Hume's *Dialogues*. Early in the *Dialogues*, Hume's skeptical character Philo suggests that matter might contain its own principle (or source) of order within itself, and so the order to be found in the universe does not need to be explained by postulating some intelligent agency.[50] We might paraphrase this as the view that matter operates according to its own laws, and that these laws, rather than an intelligent designer, are the sufficient explanation of the order to be found in the universe (a view that modern science apparently seeks to substantiate).

Paley considers such a view in two guises in his *Natural Theology*. Recall that to illustrate the argument from design, Paley considers the inferences a person would be entitled to draw about a watch found lying in a field. After arguing that the evidence of design contained within the

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48. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 15.

49. See David Paulsen, "The Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1975) for a more elaborate consideration of the compatibility of the argument from design and Mormon theology.

50. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 31.

watch suffices to convey to any observer, even an otherwise uninformed observer, that the watch had an intelligent designer, Paley goes on to contend that were we to observe that the watch itself contained the means for producing other watches—that one ordered entity possessed the means to produce others—this should not lead us to reject the idea that the watch must have a designer. Instead this discovery should lead us to conclude that the skill of the designer of the first watch, or of the series taken as a whole if we suppose it to be infinite, is even more to be admired than we had previously thought.[51]

To apply Paley's diagnosis to our paraphrase of Philo's proposal, were we faced with a set of laws that explained how the universe could produce and continue to produce and reproduce the machines praised by natural theologians like Cleanthes, this would only show us that the designer of the universe was even more skilled and clever than we had previously supposed, for this designer has established a regularly and continually procreative order. However difficult it would be to engineer the wonders of nature with the laws of nature already in place, it is an even better trick to establish a law-governed system that produces those wonders without further direct intervention. The fact that the laws of nature could produce the wonders of nature just shows that the system of natural laws is itself an even more marvelous wonder which all the more requires an (even more) intelligent designer to explain its existence.

The more modest version of the argument from design considered earlier puts intelligent design on a par with other theories purporting to explain the origin of our complex world with its complex things. The version now under consideration, on the other hand, places design on a different level entirely: Even if those other theories *can* explain the wonders we see, intelligent design, the argument goes, is required to explain the fact that the universe operates according to the principles upon which those theories rely. (And if those principles are subsumed under yet higher principles, then intelligent design will be required to explain why the universe operates according to *those* principles, and so on.) The same explanatory regress can arise once a creative intelligence is introduced: The argument's own logic requires that if we postulate the existence of, say, a human super-scientist to explain either orderly nature or the set of order-producing natural laws, the existence of such a marvelous being would also need explaining.

This grander version of the argument from design, then, amounts to a cosmological argument: There is this feature about the universe, order, requiring some ultimate explanation/first cause. Paralleling the other variations of the cosmological argument discussed above, to satisfy the

51. Paley, *Natural Theology*, 9, 10-16, 17-26.

demand for explanation there must be posited the existence of an intelligent designer whose existence and capacity for intelligent design do not themselves require further explanation. Further, as with the cosmological arguments already considered, the being whose existence the cosmological argument from design allegedly proves cannot be the Mormon God. Whatever (supra-human) ability the Mormon God has to impart order to the universe is derivative, having been acquired by him from some other source. Accordingly, even if this argument works, it does not show the existence of the Mormon God; the Mormon God could exist even if the argument's conclusion is false, even if there is no ultimate source of order, but instead only local explanations, particular beings within the system of nature who direct the organization of this, that, or the other corner of the universe.

As a Mormon apologetic, the cosmological argument from design faces other problems. First, there is within Mormon thought a strong tendency to conceive of God as bound by natural laws, contrary to the cosmological argument from design's implicit characterization of God as superior thereto. In addition to the naturalistic readings of major miracles described above, consider this striking passage from Brigham Young:

> [W]hat do you love truth for? Is it because you can discover a beauty in it, because it is congenial to you; or because you think it will make you a ruler, or a Lord? If you conceive that you will attain to power upon such a motive, you are much mistaken. It is a trick of the unseen power, that is abroad amongst the inhabitants of the earth, that leads them astray, binds their minds, and subverts their understanding.
>
> Suppose that our Father in heaven, our elder brother, the risen Redeemer, the Saviour of the world, or any of the Gods of eternity should act upon this principle, to love truth, knowledge, and wisdom, because they are all powerful, and by the aid of this power they could send devils to hell, torment the people of the earth, exercise sovereignty over them, and make them miserable at their pleasure; they would cease to be Gods; and as fast as they adopted and acted upon such principles, they would become devils, and be thrust down in the twinkling of an eye; the extension of their kingdom would cease, and their God-head come to an end. (JD 1:117)

Young's God is so far bound by laws governing his exercise of power that his continuing godhood depends on continuing conformity to those laws. Admittedly, the laws here at issue are apparently not those of nature; however, a God whose continuance in office depends on his motivations certainly has limits, and a God limited in these ways might as well be bound by (at least some) natural laws, as well.

The cosmological version of the argument from design raises yet other questions when offered in a Mormon context. The most striking

(and most along the lines of the preceding critique) of those questions might be: How can a being who once was within the natural order exit that order? Even if such exit were comprehensible, in what sense would the being remain a man, as Joseph Smith taught that God the Father does?

This still leaves us with the more humble version of the argument from design, which insists on intelligent design as a more plausible alternative to secular scientific alternatives of the same order, notably, of course, organic evolution and natural selection.

Critics of religious belief often explain its origins roughly as follows:

> The earliest theoretical attempts to describe and explain the universe involved the idea that events and natural phenomena were controlled by spirits with human emotions. . . .These spirits inhabited natural objects, like rivers and mountains, including celestial bodies, like the sun and moon. They had to be placated and their favors sought in order to ensure the fertility of the soil and the rotation of the seasons.[52]

These accounts depict religious beliefs as the product of primitive, incipient scientific theorizing; more modern religious beliefs are but refinements of these earlier attempts, grown less specific to prevent their falsification (e.g., modern believers no longer maintain that deity resides in an earthly abode like the Greeks' Mount Olympus). While religious beliefs no longer play an important role in explaining most particular phenomena (most, but not all, because religious people commonly continue to believe that God causes particular events known as miracles), they are still employed as explanations of larger questions, such as why the universe exists: "In our society it is still customary for parents and teachers to answer most of these questions. . .with an appeal to vaguely recalled religious precepts."[53] Whatever their views as to the origins of religious belief, proponents of the argument from design share these critics' views of the nature and proper means of evaluating religious hypotheses, viz., that they are theories in competition with those of secular science, to be accepted on the grounds of their scientific utility.

Presumably, to the extent that science can provide plausible, secular alternatives to religious hypotheses, the latter (with their gratuitous ontological commitments) should be rejected in favor of the former. However, to follow apologists like William Paley in asserting that the magnificent artifices we observe in nature require postulation of an intelligent designer to explain their existence, is to rest religious belief on an unsta-

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52. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 171-72.

53. Carl Sagan, "Introduction to Hawking," from Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, ix.

ble appeal to ignorance: The argument is that we have no knowledge of how these contrivances might have emerged from natural processes, so we must postulate a supernatural origin for them.[54] Accordingly, religious belief is threatened when a clever Darwin comes along offering an explanation which scientists tell us is plausible.

Of course, stalwart natural religionists insist that Darwin was not so clever, after all, and that his own theories and those of his disciples are much weaker than religious claims. Yet it is precisely in the existence of this dispute where I think the greatest difficulty with the argument from design can be seen, and this problem also arises for the argument from the Book of Mormon. The problem can be shown even more vividly against the larger backdrop of both arguments, so I will postpone a more complete explanation of what I see as the fundamental problem shared by the two arguments until I have described the argument from the Book of Mormon more fully. Before turning to the latter argument, however, I will consider some important Mormon treatments of the argument from design.

The argument from design finds apparent but undeveloped support in early Mormon sources. The Book of Mormon prophet Alma refutes Korihor, the atheistic anti-Christ, by observing that "the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator" (Alma 30:44). The *Lectures on Faith* endorse the argument, with an important caveat: Contrary to what Paley argues, the *Lectures* insist that evidence of design can serve only to validate an idea that must itself be acquired from another source; it is only "after a revelation of Jesus Christ" that "the works of creation, throughout their vast forms and varieties, clearly exhibit his eternal power and Godhead" (*Lectures* 2:4). According to the *Lectures*, the idea of a creator originates with God's revelation of himself to Adam; Adam shared the knowledge imparted through this revelation to his children, and they to theirs, so that every individual born after Adam first becomes acquainted with the idea of a creator through human testimony (*Lectures* 2:44).

B. H. Roberts's treatments of the argument from design self-consciously reflected the limitation recognized by the *Lectures*. In an instructional manual first published in 1888, Roberts directly adopted what the *Lectures* apparently taught about the argument from design: "The evidence of tradition, confirmed by the works of nature, created the assurance of faith in the minds of men that God existed." In this comparatively early work, Roberts also insisted upon a related limitation of the

54. Cf. Philo's critique of Demea's cosmological argument in Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, pt. 9 (esp. p. 57).

argument. Roberts hypothesized that the faith in God's existence established by the argument from design led its possessors "to the performance of works of righteousness. . .for doubtless, side by side with the tradition of his existence, came also the idea that he loved righteousness."[55] For Roberts, natural religion tells us nothing about God's moral attributes, and so has no normative content[56]; our knowledge of God's character must be derived from revelation and the tradition that propagates it, not from the wonders of nature. This conviction remained central to Roberts's thinking about the argument from design.[57]

According to Roberts, the information allegedly derivable from the wonders of nature via the argument from design is limited in other important respects. Roberts freely conceded that "the works of creation. . . do indeed testify of the existence of intelligence higher than [*sic*] of man" who upholds the order evident therein.[58] Roberts argues that the orderly system of eternally existent force and matter which we witness around us owes its organization to a third eternally existent cause, intelligence. Yet Roberts insists that the intelligence thereby shown to exist is essentially generic.[59] He accordingly concludes that the argument from design is insufficient as a defense of belief in Mormonism, or in Christianity or any other form of theism. Thus, in addition to the shortcomings previously noted, Roberts observed that the argument he considered said nothing "as to the kind of being [God] is. Is He personal or impersonal? Merely 'a power outside ourselves'? . . .[D]oes He hold personal relations to man, and men definite and personal relations to Him? . . .And what is man that God is mindful of him?"[60] Roberts's argument admittedly yields no more definitive content than the recognition by Hume's character Philo of the likelihood that some intelligent but otherwise

55. B. H. Roberts, *The Gospel: An Exposition of Its First Principles*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: *The Deseret News*, 1924), 95.

56. Philosophers from Plato to Kant and beyond have emphasized the logical problems arising from the effort to derive conclusions about how we should act from any knowledge about God, including knowledge of his character, but Roberts does not appear to have been impressed. For Roberts, religion properly shapes conduct by informing human beings of their duties to God. See, e.g., B. H. Roberts, *The Seventy's Course in Theology: Third Year: The Doctrine of Deity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Company, 1910), 10.

57. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology: Third Year*, 10. See also Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, 109, 129.

58. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology: Third Year*, 10.

59. Ibid., lesson IV. See also Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, chaps. 6-7. Roberts's argument is also liable to the criticism leveled by Hume's character Philo, that the birth and growth of human beings from infancy to (more or less) rational adulthood suggests that intelligence springs from natural processes, rather than the contrary view (underlying the argument from design) that those processes derive from intelligent sources.

60. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology: Third Year*, 10.

inscrutable something has imparted order to the universe.[61] This sharply limits the utility of Roberts's argument as a Mormon apologetic.

In his *The Articles of Faith*, Talmage couched essentially similar arguments in unjustifiably more definitive rhetoric. Talmage first characterized the validity of the inference from the existence in nature of "means adapted to end" to the existence of an intelligent designer thereof as "self-evident."[62] Apparently building on this argument, Talmage offered a variant that incorporates some of the reasoning of Aquinas's third Way. Talmage reasoned that something cannot come from nothing, so if there had ever been a time when nothing existed, then nothing would exist now. Since something does exist now, there cannot have been a time when nothing existed; that is, something has always existed. To defend the further conclusion that some *intelligent* thing answering to the title of creator must always have existed, Talmage then argued from the premises that a) "the effects of intelligence are universally present," and b) intelligence cannot come from either energy or matter,[63] to the conclusion that there must always have been some intelligent thing in existence. This eternally existent intelligent thing, the effects of whose intelligence "are universally present," is God. In contrast to Roberts's more cautious appraisal, Talmage further insisted that the works of nature exhibit God's "will and purpose."[64]

Talmage persistently characterized the God whose existence he sought to prove in non-Mormon terms. Talmage described his God as a being "[b]eyond and above nature" and an "eternal Ruler," and argued that the entire "system of nature is the manifestation" of this being's intelligence. However, the teachings of the King Follett Discourse preclude viewing Mormonism's God as the eternal ruler whose intelligent governance is co-eternal "with existence itself," as Talmage would have it.[65] There was a time when the god of the King Follett Discourse was not God, and so the god Talmage described cannot be the God of Mormonism.

In a related vein, granting for the sake of argument that intelligence cannot come from matter or energy, and the inference from order to intelligent design, Talmage's conclusions still overreach his argument's premises. In particular, the conclusion that some one intelligent thing answering to Talmage's singular God must always have existed does not

61. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, pt.12.

62. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 29-30.

63. But then, in the same paragraph, Talmage also insisted that energy cannot come from matter.

64. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 30-31.

65. Ibid.

follow. At best, Talmage's argument shows that the universe has never been devoid of intelligence, but his argument does not show that some one intelligent being has always existed. It would be more appropriate to draw Roberts's more modest conclusion, shared with Hume's character Philo,[66] that the orderliness of the universe suggests the existence of some intelligent creative force which is not further defined; and that conclusion does little for the cause of Mormon apology.

Elsewhere Talmage clearly and directly embraced the King Follett teaching that "the Father of Jesus Christ. . .was a Man, and has progressed. . .to His present position of priesthood and power, of Godship and Godliness, as the Supreme Being whom we all profess to worship," which conflicts with the idea of God as the singular intelligent being eternally responsible for the order in the universe. Talmage also described God as above and beyond nature in his much later "Earth and Man" address, where he characterized the natural processes studied by scientists as secondary causes, standing and operating behind, and above which stands, the "First Great Cause." This description of God as above and beyond nature apparently places God outside the natural order. Yet shortly before making this characterization in his "Earth and Man" address, Talmage said that all natural processes are "due to" God "as the administrator of law and order."[67] A God who merely administers natural laws would seem to be bound thereby, rather than superior thereto. I am inclined to regard the inconsistencies in Talmage's characterizations of God merely as unfortunately imprecise appropriations of more orthodox terminology, but I recognize that those characterizations may also evidence an enduring failure fully to appreciate the divergence of Mormon from orthodox theology. Whatever Talmage's considered views, insofar as his arguments purport to show the existence either of an eternally ruling creative intelligence standing above and beyond nature (as claimed by Talmage), or some undefined intelligent force or forces (as suggested by the parallels with Roberts), those arguments fail to answer the needs of Mormon apology. Roberts's arguments do not answer those needs either, but then Roberts never claimed they did.

The Argument from the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon purports to be a historical record of four New World peoples who owed their presence in the New World to the migration of three small groups from the Middle East (1 Nephi 2, 4, 7, 9, 16-19; Omni 1:13-16; Ether 1-3, 6). Joseph Smith claimed to have translated the record from golden plates hidden in the earth by a leader of one of those groups on the verge of its destruction, about 400 C.E. (Mormon 8), plates whose location had been re-

66. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, pt. 12.
67. *The Essential James E. Talmage*, 139-40, 245, 244.

vealed to Joseph by an angel (Joseph Smith History, 1:30-75). Some within Mormonism argue that the only plausible explanation of the existence of this book is the explanation given by Joseph Smith. From this, two further conclusions might be drawn: that Joseph Smith was indeed a prophet who (re)established the Lord's church, and that one must suppose the existence of God to explain the original compilation of the record on the golden plates, as well as its subsequent preservation and its final retrieval and translation by Joseph Smith. This pattern of argument has a history dating back to Joseph Smith himself.[68] Perhaps the best known recent practitioner of this form of argument is Mormon linguist and historian Dr. Hugh Nibley,[69] and before him, Roberts.[70]

Among other things, such arguments have been made on the basis of: a) purported archaeological support for claims put forward in the Book of Mormon[71] and purported correspondence between Book of Mormon narratives and Native American legends;[72] b) the improbability that a person with Joseph Smith's resources could have produced a work of such length and complexity under the kinds of difficult circumstances faced during the production of the book;[73] c) historical documentation of the testimonies both of divinely appointed and incidental witnesses to the existence of the plates, testimonies which (historical research suggests) continued to be held and announced under circumstances wherein a reasonable person might expect to uncover any falsehoods;[74] and d) most recently such things as wordprint analysis and arguing for the presence of distinctively Hebraic literary forms in the book.[75]

The claims to archaeological support, in particular, have been rejected by non-Mormon authorities,[76] and this illustrates the crucial weakness which this pattern of argument shares with the argument from design. Believers and nonbelievers alike who expect fundamental religious

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68. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 266-67.

69. Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), 219-42.

70. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, vols. 2-3 (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1909).

71. Ibid., vol. 2, chaps. 24-27; vol. 3, chap. 32.

72. Ibid., vol. 2, chaps. 27-29; vol. 3, chaps. 30-31, 34.

73. Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 219-42.

74. Richard Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1981).

75. John Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 221-26, 230-32.

76. Smithsonian Institution, "Statement Regarding the Book of Mormon" (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution); Michael Coe, "Mormons and Archaeology: An Outside View," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1973): 40-48.

questions to be settled by consideration of the kinds of evidence appealed to by the arguments from the Book of Mormon and from design are guilty of failing to appreciate what the Bible itself has to say about faith. Paul characterizes faith as something without which we cannot please God (Hebrews 11:6), and through which we can receive "a good report" (Hebrews 11:39).[77] According to Matthew, Christ himself characterized faith as one of the weightier matters of divinely given law (Matthew 23:23). Unless we are willing to consider scientific or archaeological (or linguistic or. . .) acumen and research as essential to currying divine favor, we should expect belief in God, if appropriate, to have some other basis.

Suppose that the best informed and least biased experts in the relevant fields were to come to the religious conclusion that there are phenomena most plausibly explained by postulating the existence of God, or that the available archaeological evidence tends, on balance, to support the Book of Mormon. Even were this true, most of us would continue to hear only the babble of disagreement proceeding from supposed experts on these issues. We would continue to find some arguing the religious side, others arguing the other, and most of us in no position to determine who is right.

This state of affairs seems especially irksome since those who refuse to have and exercise faith in God in the way Mormonism prescribes will be denied certain rewards that will be received by those who do.[78] I am at a loss to understand how proficiency or lack thereof in cosmogony or archaeology or textual analysis renders one worthy of rewards or punishments; I am aware of no evidence tending to support the notion that becoming expert in any of these areas makes a person better while there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to the contrary.

There may be something to be said for the idea that in order to be a god a person must possess a certain minimum of reasoning capability. Building on this, it could be argued that a person who is unable to follow this, that, or the other argument showing the existence of God is too stupid to be exalted. Descartes appears to have thought that the requisite stupidity was itself blameworthy: In the letter dedicating his *Meditations on First Philosophy* to the faculty of the Sorbonne, he insists that knowledge of the existence of God is so easily gained that those who fail to acquire it are at fault.[79] In a Mormon setting, we need not go so far for this explanation to work: It could be argued that gods, in addition to being

77. I assume, here, that the relevant sort of faith includes belief although belief might not exhaust the relevant faith.

78. Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 119.

79. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3.

good people, must have at least a certain IQ. Talmage follows Descartes in blaming people who do not appreciate the force of the evidence for God's existence and goes on to characterize them as downright wicked: Every person starts with an "inherited instinct toward his Maker," and if he is not led to ever stronger belief by the reasoning Talmage offers, it must be because he "has forfeited his wisdom by wrongdoing, bringing darkness over his mind in place of light, and ignorance instead of knowledge. By such a course, the mind becomes depraved and incapable of appreciating the finer arguments in nature. A willful sinner grows deaf to the voice of both intuition and reason in holy things."[80] According to Talmage, to all but willful sinners the existence of God is plausible to begin with, and even more convincing upon reflection.

Descartes and Talmage's claim, that the proofs of God's existence are so obvious that those who fail to follow them deserve what they get, might have some merit when considered in relation to the comparatively uncomplicated ontological and cosmological arguments those writers offer (which, the reader will recall, even if successful prove the existence of the wrong God). However, those claims are quite weak with regard to the non-cosmological argument from design and the argument from the Book of Mormon. Here, the evidence and arguments are anything but simple and obvious, requiring not only intelligence but also academic sophistication, and that in specific disciplines. This latter point deserves especial notice: There is not, so far as I am aware, any commandment in the entire corpus of Mormon scripture that everybody must engage in the study of cosmogony or archaeology or textual analysis, nor is there any other clue that God desires such study (in particular).

Accordingly, I reject the basis for religious belief proffered by the ecumenical argument from design and its parochial cousin, the argument from the Book of Mormon. To consider a particular case, while there may be those who expect the historical veracity of the Book of Mormon to be borne out by future archaeological investigation, I think it quite proper to believe in the truth of that book without being one of those people. Had God intended to provide clear evidence for the book, he could have sent his angel, with the plates, to modern researchers for examination. Instead, if tradition speaks truly, God had them delivered to an obscure boy and provided a handful of witnesses, perhaps expecting us to believe on the basis of some combination of what the boy, the witnesses, and the book itself had to say.

A tribute to Bertrand Russell written shortly after his death reports a conversation between Russell and a friend at a celebration of Russell's

80. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 32.

ninetieth birthday which has become a stock anecdote in philosophical circles. After observing to Russell that he was by that time not only the world's most famous atheist, but in all probability also the oldest, Russell's friend asked "What will you do, Bertie, if it turns out you've been wrong? I mean, what if, when the time comes, you should meet *Him*? What will you say?" Russell's eyes are reported to have brightened as he contemplated this prospect. After some reflection Russell pointed a finger upward and replied, "Why, I should say, 'God, you gave us insufficient evidence!' "[81]

Russell's imagined response implies that the proper grounds for believing that God does or does not exist are evidentiary: If there is sufficient evidence for believing that God exists, we should believe, and if not, we should not.[82] While the *New Yorker* did not report what Russell expected God's response would be, I assume Russell would have expected God to appreciate the significance of Russell's complaint and not trouble him further over the matter; but I would expect God to inform Russell that he had missed the point. I think Talmage and FARMS have missed it, too.

The Argument from Spiritual Witness. Perhaps the most likely response from a Mormon asked to explain why she believes would be that she had received some sort of personal revelation from God regarding the truth of what she was told; while this amounts to an appeal to evidence of sorts, the evidence to which this kind of appeal is made is not the kind requiring academic expertise to evaluate. However, this argument faces problems of its own.

Mormon missionaries teach investigators they must pray to know the truth of what they are being taught. Missionaries are advised to cite in relation to this teaching a scripture admonishing the investigator to pray in faith.[83] Engaging in the very act of prayer requires some faith, namely the placing of sufficient credence in what the missionaries teach to put it to some sort of test, and the scriptures teach that prayers must be offered in faith in order to be answered (Matthew 21:22). Further, and more to the present point, recognizing the answer to the prayer as an answer requires antecedent religious belief.

The answer to prayer which the investigator seeks might itself be characterized as a minor miracle. I believe that the claim "faith precedes the miracle" (frequently reiterated in Mormon discussions of both) also em-

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81. *The New Yorker*, 21 February 1970, 29.

82. Cf. Orson Pratt, "True Faith," included in N. B. Lundwall, ed., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.).

83. "First Discussion," *Uniform System for Teaching the Gospel* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1986) 1, 18; Moroni 10:3-5.

bodies an important conceptual point and is not just an observation about God's methodology. Without religious belief a miracle would not, in general, be recognized as such; rather, it would be regarded perhaps as a delusion, or as an experience for which, it is true, we currently have no secular explanation, but which will, in time, be so explained. This likewise applies to the minor miracle now under consideration, viz., that religious belief is required to recognize an answer to prayer as an answer to prayer.

To see why, consider the nature of the answer missionaries advise investigators to expect: that spiritual witnesses of truth usually take the form of "a peaceful, good feeling rather than something dramatic."[84]

> Answers to prayers may come as feelings of peace and confidence or as thoughts that enter our minds. Sometimes we may have special feelings, such as particularly warm feelings in our hearts. Or perhaps the events in our lives may occur in answer to our prayers. As our faith grows, we learn to know when and how our Heavenly Father is answering our prayers.[85]

A report given by David Whitmer, one of the witnesses who claimed that an angel showed them the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated, graphically illustrates the difficulty of gauging the subtle promptings for which missionaries instruct investigators to look. Concerned about their ability to raise sufficient funds to have the Book of Mormon published, several of Joseph Smith's associates suggested a trip to Canada to sell the Canadian copyright to the book. Joseph claimed to have received a revelation that such a mission should be undertaken and would be successful, but the effort failed. Joseph, unable to account for the failure, inquired of the Lord as to its cause; the answer he received was that "[s]ome revelations are of God: some revelations are of man: and some revelations are of the devil."[86]

In Alma's oft cited explanation of the genesis of faith, he counseled his listeners to begin with nothing more than a desire to believe, if necessary, and then to allow that desire to work on them (Alma 32:27). A psychologist might describe as nothing more than self-fulfilling prophecy the phenomena which missionaries instruct investigators to seek as evidence of the truth of what they are being taught: Beginning with a desire to believe something she finds pleasant, the investigator convinces herself that it is true and her subconscious, or some such entity, produces the pleasant phenomena she seeks.

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84. "First Discussion," 18.

85. Ibid., 9.

86. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ by a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Concord, California: Pacific Publishing Company, 1959), 30-31; cf. D&C 46:7.

I am not here endorsing the psychological explanation; versions with which I am familiar suffer from vagueness. Yet so, too, does the religious explanation: There is no specification of exactly what will be experienced, or when. If someone reports failure in the experiment, she may expect to be counseled on the need to continue to pray, conforming to God's timetable rather than expecting him to conform to hers, and to pray with greater faith (!). Still, I am not denying that experiences of the sort which missionaries tell investigators to seek do indeed transpire, or that they have the divine origin the missionaries ascribe to them; and I am not denying that they have an important role to play in the development of faith. I dispute only the justifiability of regarding them as strong evidence for, or as a proper foundation for belief in, the truth of religious hypotheses.

In general, to appeal to this sort of evidence is circular, for it is the very explanatory scheme according to which the phenomenon in question *is* evidence that is to be justified by the purported evidence. Psychology stands at the ready to produce alternative explanations, and it appears that the only basis for rejecting psychological explanations in favor of the religious explanation of such phenomena is bias toward the religious explanation: The desire which investigators allow to work within them to produce belief is exactly what leads them to see the resultant phenomena as evidence for what they wish to believe.[87]

In his *Seventy's Course in Theology*, Roberts considered John Stuart Mill's variation on this critical theme. In passages quoted at length by Roberts, Mill critically considered the argument that God must exist because everybody has some sort of inner perception of God. Mill observed both that this perception does not in fact appear to be universal and that proponents of this argument commonly respond to the first observation by insisting that the perception is in fact universal although some may be unaware of (or unwilling to acknowledge) its presence in their minds. Mill then pointedly asked whether those who claim to have this perception "may fairly be asked to consider whether it is not more likely that they are mistaken as to the origin of an impression in their minds, than that others are ignorant of the very existence of an impression in theirs." To answer Mill's critique, Roberts referred the reader to his own earlier discussion of Joseph Smith's teaching that the spirit of man has a natural, intuitive attraction to the truth, which only wickedness can dissipate.[88]

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87. For like considerations adduced in support of much more practical conclusions, see Janice Allred, "Infallible Revelation?" *Sunstone* 20 (July 1997): 5, 7. I think the arguments from design and from the Book of Mormon are instructively comparable to the argument from spiritual experience in this respect. For further elaboration, see chap. 4 of my "Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology."

88. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology: Third Year*, 13-14.

Yet whatever the value of Smith's teachings as an explanation for believing Mormons of the fact that an awareness of God's existence does not appear to be universal, that teaching cannot revive the argument from spiritual experience because that teaching, again, is part and parcel of what is supposed to be justified by the experience.

Conclusion

And so I conclude that, whatever the status or fate of Mormonism's traditional aspirations toward rationality in its theology, there is no tenable rational Mormon apology. The ontological and cosmological arguments are unavailable to Mormonism, and the inherent complexity of (the humble version of) the argument from design renders that argument an inappropriate basis for faith in any form of Christianity. The distinctively Mormon variant of the argument from design, the argument from the Book of Mormon, fails for the same reasons as its more ecumenical cousin, and the argument from spiritual witness puts the interpretive cart before the horse.

So what is to be done? I suggest accepting and embracing the conclusion that no rational apology can be made, and asking why that should be so. In other words, instead of asking why I should believe, I might do better to ask why God would want me to believe without any rational justification. Then, if Alma is right about the legitimate role of desire in generating faith, the question becomes: Why would God expect me to desire the truth of this gospel and to allow my beliefs to be shaped thereby?

Of course, even if I find good answers to those questions, the answers could not consistently give me any justification for my belief. Thus, unless I discover good grounds for *not* believing, in matters religious I unavoidably remain in the position of having to decide, rather than discover, what to believe. And maybe that's right where God wants us.[89]

89. For more details, see chap. 4 of my "An Essay in Philosophical Mormon Theology."