THOMAS AQUINAS MEETS JOSEPH SMITH: TOWARD A MORMON ETHICS OF NATURAL LAW

Levi Checketts

In opposition to Christian traditions that teach human guilt as a result of original sin, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that humans "will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression."[1] Unlike the Lutheran *simul justus et peccator,* wherein human beings are thoroughly sinful and saved only by God's mercy, Mormons believe that human agency is responsible for human sinfulness and that the same agency is required to do good works for which we are ultimately judged.[2] This is not to say that human beings "earn" their salvation but rather notes that we have a more active role

---

I write this paper as an outsider of sorts: I was raised in the LDS faith and later left and became Catholic. One might claim that my advocating natural law owes to a bias toward the tradition I have adopted, but I suggest that it is more probable that I joined the Catholic Church rather than a Protestant denomination because of the similarities between Mormonism and Catholicism, some of which include favoring a hierarchical structure, apostolic lineage, priesthood authority, the sacraments (including baptism, confirmation, communion, ordained priesthood, and sacramental marriage), and a tendency to look beyond the Bible for answers to theological questions.

1. Articles of Faith 1:2. See also Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott, *Claiming Christ: A Mormon–Evangelical Debate* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2007), chapter 7 and Robert L. Millet and Gregory C. V. Johnson, *Bridging the Divide: The Continuing Conversation between a Mormon and an Evangelical* (Rhinebeck, N.Y.: Monkfish Book Publishing, 2007), 43.

2. See Millet and McDermott, *Claiming Christ,* 187.

in both our guilt and our redemption. In other words, while "works righteousness" do not merit salvation, they are a necessary component of Mormon discipleship.[3] As such, the question of ethics is crucial for Mormon religious life. Unfortunately, while other traditions such as the Catholic Church have systematized moral theological teachings, Latter-day Saints yet lack a systematized ethic.

In this paper, I analyze some attempts to form a Mormon ethical method and propose a different method based on Thomistic natural law theory. This method has been eschewed by some writers in the Mormon tradition,[4] but I contend that this is due primarily to misinterpretation or overly narrow interpretations of the natural law. Other authors have offered ethical methods based on utilitarianism or deontology, both of which may be attractive theories of ethics for society but do not adequately capture what a theory of ethics directed toward salvation would entail. I propose a theory for Latter-day Saint personal ethics that can be utilized in the concrete messiness of everyday life—one that, while thorough, is yet flexible enough to adapt to new situations while remaining tethered to fundamental theological principles.

Why an LDS Ethic?

Doctrine and Covenants 88:38–39 reads, "And unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions. All beings who abide not in those conditions are not justified." Furthermore, the third article of faith says that salvation is contingent upon "obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel." This provides ethical discussion in Mormonism with an edge that it lacks in Augus-

---

3. "Works righteousness" is a phrase associated with Lutheran theology. Luther polemicized the works righteousness mindset of then-current Catholic popular theology which suggested doing good things earns one's salvation. I use the term "works righteousness" as this is the vocabulary employed by Luther.

4. See, for example, Courtney Campbell, "Social Responsibility and LDS Ethics," *Sunstone* 9, no. 2 (1984): 13.

tinian Christianity: over and against the *sola fides* approach of Martin Luther, Mormonism emphasizes morality's importance for salvation.[5] For many Protestants, ethical questions are secondary: salvation tends to be either contingent on faith alone, in the Lutheran vein, or is predetermined, in the Calvinist vein.[6] For Mormons, however, ethical questions are primary. Ethics ought to be an important issue for Mormons for no less a reason than that Latter-day Saints believe that their very salvation requires good moral living.[7]

The problem emerges, however, when we seek to articulate what that moral living means. "[T]he laws and ordinances of the Gospel" may be the ultimate standard, but unless every particular ethical question is divinely answered, individual Latter-day Saints will need a way of dealing with personal moral dilemmas. A doctrine of continuing revelation does allow for many new problems to be addressed through divine inspiration, but the question of the personal still persists. To put it in more concrete terms, we must ask whether the laws and ordinances of the gospel can inform the average faithful Latter-day Saint in how to vote in elections in her country, how to act in business matters, what she owes both to society at large and to specific individuals within society, and how to better herself. Many of these issues are addressed in official Mormon teaching, but two risks inevitably present themselves. The first is that an ethic that is specific enough to dictate the very concrete details of a

---

5. Soteriology and eschatology in Mormon teaching are different than they are in mainstream Christian teaching. The question of degrees of glory are important in their own right but are not essentially different from teleological concerns about the afterlife present in other traditions.

6. See Martin Luther, *On Christian Liberty,* translated by W. A. Lambert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 41 and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* translated by Henry Beveridge (Orlando, Fla.: Signalman Publishing, 2009), III.21.1, Kindle.

7. I am aware that this statement is controversial and that several LDS writers, including Robert Millet, deny this claim as absolute, though often concede to it partially. See Millet, *Claiming Christ,* 187.

person's life will likely not fit all persons. Thus, a teaching that may be perfect for the LDS Church in Utah may not fit in Uganda or South Korea. Here we may note Paul's own admonition to the Corinthian Christians to practice different dietary habits based on their dinner companions (1 Corinthians 10:27–29), an admonition that recognizes the sensitivity of different social contexts for personal moral behavior. The second risk is that this becomes a set of rules, a checklist whereby Latter-day Saints feel they must meet the bare minimum to inherit eternal life, a notion that goes against Jesus' teaching of going the extra mile (Matthew 5:41).

When we consider the issue of ethics in Mormonism, we find two obstacles that have prevented much serious scholarship till now, but also two reasons why such scholarship is necessary. The first obstacle is that there tends to be an air of distrust for intellectualism within Mormonism. A distrust for "doctors and lawyers" and the "philosophies of the world" erects a practical boundary around ethical systems that come from outside the LDS tradition.[8] The second obstacle is the hierarchical structure of the LDS Church.[9] An emphasis on the authority of the prophet first and foremost demotes the importance of personal moral decisions to the periphery. The first reason why ethics are necessary is to provide a more thorough account of sin. While there are many sins listed and discussed within Mormon teaching, questions, for example, of how one uses her money or whom one votes for (and why) are also questions that require personal discernment. The second reason is to promote positive moral development. Ethics is not simply interested in the bad we do; it also seeks to explain what good we ought to do as well.

A more thorough discussion may be warranted, but this should suffice to show that there is a need for at least a stand-in ethical system

---

8. See Willard Richards, et al., "The King Follett Discourse," *Times and Seasons* 5 (Aug. 15, 1844): 614, and, more recently, Bonnie L. Oscarson, "Defenders of the Family Proclamation," Apr. 2015, https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/04/defenders-of-the-family-proclamation?lang=eng.

9. See Articles of Faith 1:5 and 1:6.

for Mormons. Latter-day Saint doctrine places great emphasis on doing good, but there needs to be a satisfactory way of discerning what good is to be done. While Latter-day Saints believe in continuing revelation, it is unlikely that a universal revelation, provided it lays down laws instead of moral methods, will be able to address every contingency. Mormons therefore need a moral method that will allow them to personally understand what actions they ought to take and what actions they ought to avoid.

Other Views

There have been previous attempts to suggest an ethical method for Mormons to follow. Some authors, like Courtney Campbell, approach methodology under the aspect of social ethics. Others, like E. E. Eriksen and Blake Ostler, examine multiple views and attempt to weigh the merits and flaws of each view.[10] Still others, like Kim McCall, champion one type of ethical model over others.[11] In this section, I examine Ostler's discussion of a utilitarian ethic (which he ultimately rejects) and McCall's arguments for a Kantian theory of moral action. I choose these two particular systems because of their prevalence in broader ethical discussion outside of the LDS Church.[12] I explore the main ideas

---

10. E. E. Eriksen, "Moral Criteria," in *Perspectives in Mormon Ethics: Personal, Social, Legal and Medical,* edited by Donald G. Hill (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1983) and Blake Ostler, "Moral Obligation and Mormonism: A Response to Francis Beckwith," *FairMormon,* http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/publications/reviews-of-the-new-mormon-challenge/moral-obligation-and-mormonism-a-response-to-francis-beckwith.

11. Kim McCall, "What is Moral Obligation in Mormon Theology?," *Sunstone* 6, no. 6 (1981): 27–31.

12. See, for example, H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 55. See also Truman G. Madsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Ethics," in *Perspectives in Mormon Ethics,* 34.

of their arguments and suggest the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches in light of Mormon teaching.

Blake Ostler provides only a short proposal for the use of utilitarianism for Mormon ethics. The thrust of his argument is essentially that utilitarianism is teleological—it favors reaching a particular goal (i.e., happiness) and so is the Mormon approach to ethics. Ostler also notes that utilitarianism is flexible and not bound by hard and fast rules, making it more conducive to a faith tradition with an open canon.[13]

This argument for utilitarianism is insufficient, however, because utilitarianism also has features that contradict LDS belief. One may see this in even a less obvious challenge from this theory: the preference of the populace, which correlates to maximizing happiness for the greatest number, is supported by Mosiah 29:26, "It is not common that the voice of the people desireth anything contrary to that which is right." However, the narrative arc of the Book of Mormon tells us that utilitarianism has a dark side: in the books of 3 Nephi, Ether, and Mormon, the majority of the people turned away from God toward wickedness. Maximized happiness (or pleasure) must be subordinated to God's ways, otherwise it potentially leads to unjust or wicked outcomes. Mormons only need recall the persecution of the early Saints by the majority will of their non-LDS neighbors to see the potential for abuse in utilitarian reasoning.

A more important objection is that utilitarianism is, by nature, theologically agnostic. The formal principle of utilitarianism according to John Stuart Mill is the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain.[14] This means that what determines the moral quality of an action is only the result it yields in terms of how many people are pleased or harmed, and to what extent this is the case. This parallels what the Spirit says in 1 Nephi 4:13, "It is better that one man should

---

13. Ostler, "Moral Obligation," under the heading "An LDS Utilitarian Ethic?"

14. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1879), 9.

perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief," but it presents a bigger problem in terms of personal ethics. One may claim that better consequences abound when a person donates her money to charity rather than to tithing, spends two years working for a service organization rather than serves a mission, marries a non-Mormon rather than marries in the temple, or relaxes on the weekends with a bottle of wine rather than observes the Word of Wisdom. Utilitarianism admits of no objective standards other than maximizing pleasure, so the commands of God are irrelevant. Furthermore, should someone try to observe all of the commandments while pursuing utilitarianism, one's intention, either to do good or evil, has no bearing in moral evaluations, so repentance and atonement for the evil one has intentionally committed are meaningless. Because of the emphasis placed on the plan of salvation in the LDS Church, an ethic of utilitarianism is inadequate for Mormon theology.

McCall proposes a Kantian, deontological approach to ethics. He first argues that divine command ethics are insufficient for Mormons because Latter-day Saints believe that human beings are co-eternal with God: God is not the ultimate authority over moral action as an eternal being. McCall contends that this is the case because human beings are *deus in potentia,* meaning that the moral standards that fall upon us similarly fall upon God.[15] Furthermore, teleological ethics are insufficient because they are contingent upon our individual desires and thus do not hold universal force.[16] He thus argues that a "universal law" morality is

---

15. McCall, "Moral Obligation," 29. The anti-divine command position is also supported by Madsen's reading of Joseph Smith's teachings in Madsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Ethics," 32. Stephen Webb clarifies this by noting that God's materiality in Mormonism subjects him to the eternal law as well; see *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 200. The scriptural basis for this position would be found in texts such as Doctrine and Covenants 130:20, Abraham 3, and others. This position is also noted below.

16. McCall, "Moral Obligation," 30.

appropriate for Mormons because "obedience is the first law of heaven."[17] Obedience to this law will be crucial, but the intention of obedience is more important than the actual result of my attempt at obedience. This means that my motivation for acting becomes the main factor in judging the moral content of my actions, and these actions will be moral if, as Kant says, "I could also will that my maxim [the generalization of my action] should become a universal law."[18] This is a workable ethic for Mormons, McCall believes, because it focuses on intention and responsibility: each person's guilt is dependent upon how well he lives up to the universal moral law that all, even God, are bound to.[19]

McCall's emphasis on intention is well placed, but the problem with the universal is precisely that it ignores the particular. We can see two particular instances in Holy Writ where this is problematic. The first is one I referenced above, namely, Nephi's being commanded to slay Laban. A good Mormon ought to hold that what Nephi did was right—without slaying Laban Nephi would never have obtained the brass plates, the descendants of Lehi would have "dwindled in unbelief," and there would be no Book of Mormon. Nephi clearly could not have willed his maxim to be a universal law, as 1 Nephi 4:10 tells us that Nephi "shrunk and would not that [he] might not slay [Laban]." The second example is the case of Abraham's being asked to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22. About this problematic incident, Søren Kierkegaard wrote that in this Abraham exhibits the act of faith wherein "the single individual now sets himself apart as the particular above the universal."[20] The faithful

---

17. Ibid.

18. Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals,* translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1895), 12. Available at http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5682/pg5682-images.html.

19. McCall, "Moral Obligation," 31.

20. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling,* translated by Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 84.

Christian cannot condemn what Abraham did, for it was commanded by God, but we cannot consider such a thing to be universalizable.

It might be the case that any other Christian can take Kant's moral theory as a viable moral theory for her faith (though this might still be problematic if she believes in divinely inspired ethical norms), but the Latter-day Saint cannot because of his belief in continual revelation.[21] The ninth article of faith declares that Mormons believe that God "will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God." God may yet reveal moral commands that would fail to meet Kant's standards of rational autonomy and universalizability. An example of this would be plural marriage set forth in Doctrine and Covenants 132. This marriage is understood as being the "new and everlasting covenant" (verse 4), which is required for obtaining the highest degree of glory in the celestial kingdom (verse 20). Eternal marriage is, therefore, a moral command for Latter-day Saints, but *plural* marriage, which God may command (verse 35), could normally never be universalizable due to the obvious problems of sexual demographics.

Kantian deontology is also problematic for the question of personal revelation. Joseph Smith taught that personal revelation is necessary for individual salvation.[22] Latter-day Saints rely upon God for personal instruction, but personal revelations, by their very nature, cannot be universalized. The woman who feels prompted to take the long drive home from work and is able to help an injured person cannot will her maxim to be a universal law—should all people always take the long route home from work they may be late for supper, they will waste gas and pollute the air, they may be late picking up their children, et cetera. This ethical behavior is not negligible either: for many Mormons, rely-

---

21. Kant himself refutes any connection between revelation and morality in his work when he states that no moral "imperatives hold for God's will or for any holy will" (*Fundamental Principles,* 19).

22. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 129.

ing on the promptings of the Spirit is essential to knowing how to live their lives. Of course personal revelation cannot be formulated into an ethical method without theological problems, but this does illustrate the problem with a Kantian ethic in Mormonism: many ethical actions that the faithful Latter-day Saint follow are believed to be highly personalized promptings from God—promptings that could not, by their very nature, be made into universal laws.[23]

McCall and Ostler, in providing differing views on a Mormon ethic, illustrate the difficult nature of the problem at hand.[24] Both of them highlight important necessary elements for an ethical method: the importance of intention rather than merely consequences, an orientation to eternal happiness, a degree of changeability to accommodate new revelation, and a universal underlying principle. An adequate Mormon ethic, it seems, would need to be able to address all of these issues at once. For these reasons, as I explain below, a Thomistic theory of natural law is a better fit for Mormon ethics than the ones previously examined.

Toward a Mormon Natural Law

The term "natural law" has been used by various authors in various ways in philosophy: the Stoic tradition is viewed as a form of natural law thinking as is the Catholic scholastic tradition, and modern philoso-

---

23. Promptings from God to perform certain actions should not be confused with divine command theory: a personal revelation is not necessary for eternal law, though it may be an instantiated revelation of that law, nor can it be systematically formulated into a theory, though it might be accommodated into one, as explained below.

24. Ostler also repeats much of McCall's argument in the section titled "A Duty-Based LDS Ethic" and proposes a love-based ethic in his penultimate section, "An LDS Theory of Ethics in Alignment with the Gospel of Christ." I neglect to mention this because his deontological arguments rely largely on McCall and his proposed theory of ethics is not one that can be made into a method very easily, though it is worth noting that this notion is very popular among Catholic thinkers such as Max Scheler, Ed Vacek, and Jean-Luc Marion.

phers such as Thomas Hobbes and Samuel Pufendorf refer to a natural law.[25] In the contemporary world of ethics, natural law is championed by such thinkers as John Finnis, Germain Grisez, Russell Hittinger, Jean Porter, and H. L. A. Hart.[26] In this context, it may be difficult to know "which" natural law theory to adhere to. There may be good reasons to follow one or another, but it is worth noting that the approach of many modern thinkers, such as Finnis and Grisez, attempts to be free of either religious or philosophical understandings of humanity while others, such as Hobbes or Hart, conceive of "natural law" merely as survival tactics. I propose that a natural law theory appropriate for Mormons must adequately fit the task of Mormon ethics and must succeed where other methods have failed. Thus, these modern approaches fail to be adequate for Mormon morality because Mormon ethics requires a theological grounding and the ultimate goal of happiness. Because of the requirements of this task, I choose for this paper the theory presented by Thomas Aquinas, an Italian Dominican friar who lived in the mid-thirteenth century. Aquinas is perhaps the most important person theologically for Catholics, though he also stands as one of the greatest medieval philosophers.[27] Aquinas does not actually say a great deal explicitly about the natural law—he only dedicates one out of 303 "questions" in his moral treatise in the *Summa Theologiae* specifically to this topic, but many Catholic moral theologians read all of his moral writing as his theory of natural law.[28] An important obstacle to note moving forward in this paper is that Aquinas's work fits specifically within the Catholic Church and therefore will not completely fit within Mormon theology.

---

25. See Howard P. Kainz, *Natural Law: An Introduction and Re-Examination* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004).

26. Ibid., chapter 4.

27. Aquinas's influence is clear in the thinking of modern thinkers such as Pope Leo XIII, Jacques Maritain, Jean Porter, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others.

28. See, for example, Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005).

I will not, then, presume that Mormon theology needs Thomism, but I do suggest that many of the ways Aquinas approached ethics from a theological perspective are consonant with Mormon teachings.

There are numerous commentaries and summaries of Aquinas's thought available, so for the purpose of this paper, I will only outline a few important notes about his view of the natural law.[29] Aquinas defines natural law as a type of law, which he defines as "nothing else than an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated."[30] The natural law itself is a human manifestation of the eternal law, which is "nothing else than the type of Divine Wisdom, as directing all actions and movements," or in other words, God's reason and will for all things, including human action.[31] Human beings all have the natural law "imprinted" on their souls by virtue of being made in the image of God and having the gift of rationality, by means of which we are able to personally access the natural law.[32] The particular way the natural law is manifest may differ from person to person based on particular circumstances, but the general, universally binding precepts are "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided."[33] Additionally, we may note that the natural law has as its aim human happiness, functions within the human conscience, and requires the development of virtues, all concepts that I discuss below.[34]

---

29. Regarding the moral thought of Aquinas, I would recommend Stephen J. Pope, ed., *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington: Georgetown, 2002). In particular, the reader may wish to consult Clifford G. Kossel, S.J., "Natural Law and Human Law" in this volume for a helpful summary of Aquinas's natural law.

30. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* translated by Black Friars (Claremont, Calif.: Coyote Canyon Press, 2010), Prima Pars Secundae Partis, question 90, article 4 (Ia IIae, Q90, A4), Kindle.

31. Ibid., Ia IIae, Q91, A2; Ia IIae, Q93, A1.

32. Ibid., Ia IIae, Q91, A2; Ia IIae, Q94, A6.

33. Ibid., Ia IIae, Q94, A4, A2.

34. Ibid., Ia IIae, Q90, A2; Ia IIae, Q94.

There are numerous aspects of Aquinas's thought that will be incompatible with good Mormon thinking. Aquinas, after all, was writing in a thirteenth-century Roman Catholic context. However, the essential points of his theory are compatible with Mormon thought. This paper notes these connections, and as such will look at four major aspects of Aquinas's natural law that may help us think more clearly about how to approach ethics for Mormons: the underlying universal principles of the natural law, the particular applications of the law for individual persons, the teleological nature of Aquinas's ethics, and finally his reliance on virtue within his overall theory. These elements, Truman Madsen notes, are crucial for a Mormon ethic as well.[35] Thus, in discussing each of these topics, I explicate Aquinas's position and demonstrate parallels in the Mormon tradition. Before we begin this project, however, it is worth noting that some authors have asked whether natural law is a fitting ethic for Mormonism and concluded that it is not.

Both Ostler and McCall dismiss Thomism, though I think they do so unfairly. Ostler, for example, admits that Joseph Smith's view is similar to a Thomistic ethic but suggests that whereas Smith thinks morality brings us to perfection, Aquinas does not.[36] This is a great mischaracterization of Aquinas's thought: Aquinas builds his ethic on the assumption that doing good leads us to happiness in God and that human morality can be perfected through the grace of God.[37] McCall's critique is a bit more nuanced and is two-pronged: on one hand, he argues, teleological ethics suggest selflessness as a means to a selfish end, and on the other, the ends are arbitrary and ethical norms are "mere suggestions of prudence."[38] The first objection seems sound, but assumes a great deal about happiness

35. Madsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Ethics," 32–33, 36, and 39.

36. Ostler, "Moral Obligation and Mormonism," under "An LDS Theory of Ethics in Alignment with the Gospel of Christ."

37. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia IIae, Q5, A1; Ia IIae, Q67, A6.

38. McCall, "Moral Obligation," 30.

and intention that does not follow. Aquinas emphasizes that the intention behind an act is prior to the act itself, meaning that being selfless in order to be selfish is really simply being selfish.[39] Selflessness to achieve selfish ends fails to result in selflessness, and thus cannot achieve the end of morally-based happiness whatsoever. McCall's second objection only holds if we lack a metaphysical base for our ethical method, but both the Thomistic account of natural law (based in Catholic theology) and our Mormon ethics are based on metaphysically rich theological groundings. Thus, though there may be problems with Thomistic natural law, the problems are not the ones McCall and Osler suggest.[40]

The first element of natural law that may aid Mormon ethics is the element of a moral principle that, while universal, is thin enough to account for different circumstances. Aquinas thinks that "as regards the general principles [of the natural law] . . . truth or rectitude is the same for all, and is equally known by all."[41] The general principle of the natural law, as mentioned above, is "'good is to be done and evil is to be avoided.' All other precepts of the natural law are based upon this."[42] Aquinas posits that there is a universal guiding moral principle located in the eternal taw, or the divine reason of God, a principle that

---

39. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia IIae, Q18, A6.

40. Louis Midgley similarly makes the case against Catholic Thomistic natural law in "The Search for Love: Is Zion to Be Built on a Natural Morality or on Prophetic Revelation?," in *Perspectives in Mormon Ethics.* Briefly, his arguments tend to fall apart because he alleges that Catholic theology is not based in conscience (50), requires no revelation (53), is not about love (54), and allows no condemnation of those who refuse to do good (57). Some of these may be based on particular interpretations of Aquinas, but Aquinas himself has a different position from all of these supposed faults. The first issue, that of conscience, is presented in this paper, but the answers to the others may be found respectively in Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia IIae, Q91, A4; Ia IIae, Q65, A2; IIa IIae, Q33, A2; and IIa IIae, Q66, A7.

41. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia IIae, Q94, A4.

42. Ibid., Ia IIae, Q94, A2.

is accessible to any person, but this does not immediately dictate specific concrete norms. He claims, "As to the proper conclusions of the practical reason, neither is the truth or rectitude the same for all, nor, where it is the same, is it equally known by all."[43] Thus, Aquinas's natural law does have a universal moral norm as its base (do good and avoid evil), but the particular way this universal is carried out will differ from case to case and will need to be contextually specified.

We already saw the need for a thin universal precept above, but the parallel between Thomistic and Mormon thought can be drawn out further. Doctrine and Covenants 130:20 states, "There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated." Truman Madsen shows through the teachings of Joseph Smith that this irrevocable law is instantiated differently in particular situations: "Then there are two sorts of 'principles' or 'laws': 1. Self-existent laws to which God himself is subject. 2. Instituted laws (in harmony with the first)—those he 'saw proper' to establish to enhance the advancement of others."[44] Furthermore, "the Prophet taught that laws or principles are adapted to various times, places, circumstances, and persons."[45] This means, then, that there exists a foundational universal moral principle upon which all concrete moral principles are based, though these are contingent. Moral rectitude is not founded upon mere universal principles, independent of external factors, but rather on the

---

43. Ibid., Ia IIae, Q94, A4.

44. Madsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Ethics," 32. It is important to note that the Mormon conception of an eternal law and Aquinas's are somewhat different. The understanding of eternal law that Madsen and McCall refer to is a precept that God himself is subject to. The understanding of Aquinas is that the eternal law is nothing other than God's will. This represents an interesting theological difference between the two religions but one that we do not have space to explore. This also means that while God reveals important norms for individuals, these laws are subject to a greater eternal law. See also Webb, *Mormon Christianity,* 200.

45. Madsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Ethics," 33.

particular way the universal law is situated in a given case. Aquinas argues that the goodness or wickedness of an action must be evaluated in light of what the act itself is, the circumstances surrounding the act, and the intention of the agent.[46] The moral evaluation of a given act is incomprehensible without noting contingencies in circumstances. It would seem, then, that a good Mormon ethic will also acknowledge both the underlying presence of a universal law and the fact that this law must be applied in concrete situations according to all relevant factors, a notion that is essentially natural law theory.

What we have thus far, however, is too thin of a morality to do much good, and if the contingent factors of person, time and place, and specific action alone are taken into consideration, we might easily find ourselves espousing moral relativism. But the agent's intentions must be pure. Aquinas notes that for an act to be "good" it must be good in intention, the act itself, and the circumstances.[47] However, he also argues that the conscience is the most important aspect of the act, and so an agent is morally obligated to follow even a conscience that is errant or misguided.[48] The conscience, then, is a sort of a "trump card" for moral reasoning: any particular act carried out in good conscience is morally excusable, though not necessarily morally good. Catholic moral teaching draws this thought out further in the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*: every person "has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of [humanity]; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his thoughts."[49] Our consciences, the very essence of why we make the moral decisions we do, are communion with

---

46. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia IIaae, Q18, A4.

47. Ibid., Ia IIae, Q19, A6 ad1.

48. Ibid., Ia IIae, Q19, A5.

49. Catholic Church, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Vatican City: Libreria Edtirice Vaticana, 1965), 16.

the divine: in following our conscience, we follow God's particular will for us. A good Catholic, if he follows his conscience, cannot do moral wrong by natural law, though he may even defy the official teachings of the church or other social norms.

The notion of conscience as communication with God has clear resonance with the principle of personal revelation within Mormonism and is connected to the notion of "godly sorrow" (2 Corinthians 7:10), an important part of genuine repentance: Alma 42:29 states, "Let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance." The heart of ethical matters for Mormons is, and *must* be, founded upon a sense of the holy, communication with the divine, and spiritual attunement. Mormons "must come to assurance on ethical matters, as on all others, through the wisdom of those who 'take the Holy Spirit for their guide.'"[50] This is not exactly the same as a Catholic teaching, but it is not entirely at odds either. Both positions maintain that personal ethical acts must be evaluated by judging what God is telling the agent. The primary difference here is that a Catholic moral agent will likely act "according to her conscience," while the Latter-day Saint moral agent will "follow the Spirit." Furthermore, when it comes to guilt, Mormons and Catholics may agree that a troubled conscience is a good thing for repentance, and both Mormons and Catholics practice individual private confession of sins as part of the process of repentance.

If Aquinas's thought is heavily dependent upon a notion of a divinely-created law and the adherence to divinely-inspired conscience, we should not be surprised that all of his ethical thought is rooted in his theological beliefs. For this reason, Aquinas's ethics are teleological: for Aquinas, all moral actions come from a person's "reason and will," which drive us toward "the end and the good."[51] The *end,* or goal, that human beings pursue in their moral actions is happiness, which can

---

50. Madsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Ethics," 47.

51. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia IIae, Q1, A1.

only be perfectly realized through "the vision of the Divine Essence," a vision that we do not receive in this life.[52] In other words, the purpose of ethics for Aquinas is eternal happiness with God. Because our end is in God, Aquinas believes that our nature, which is primarily rational, is one that conforms with the will of God. In turn, the natural law "is nothing else than an imprint on us of the Divine light" which every person has by virtue of being a rational being made in the image of God.[53] Every moral obligation, therefore, is derived from the question of what we can derive from our "respective inclinations to [our] proper acts and ends."[54] Thus, the way that God created us, as well as what God created us for, i.e., to be unified with God for eternity, which is nothing else than eternal happiness, provides the basis for moral action.

Aside from specific theological differences, this view shares much with Mormon thought. We have already established the teleological requirement of Mormon morality—a good ethic for Mormons will be based upon the achievement of eternal happiness through proper moral living, or, as Doctrine and Covenants 130:21 says, "And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated." We may even expound this further. Madsen explains that for Joseph Smith, "the 'ought' . . . cannot be separated from the 'is.'"[55] The reality of human existence must yield some sort of ethical norms, but those norms are based on an understanding of what it is we yearn for. Madsen suggests "the joy of the perfected person, eternal joy, is akin to Divine joy,"[56] and this joy is to be contrasted to a utilitarian "pleasure" or deontological duty. Moral action brings about our happiness in an eternal sense and is based upon the types of beings we are—beings who

---

52. Ibid., Ia IIae, Q1, A8; Ia IIae, Q3, A8.

53. Ibid., Ia IIae, Q91, A2.

54. Ibid.

55. Madsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Ethics," 30.

56. Ibid., 36.

have something of the divine in us. Our moral action, then, will be the type of action that makes us more like God, will be based on our godly natures, and will bring us happiness in eternity.

The notion of becoming God is not a notion that has enjoyed much prominence in Catholicism, but Thomistic natural law does emphasize a progression in moral character toward godliness through cultivating virtue.[57] Virtues, for Aquinas, are "habits," which are character traits related to a being's nature that are "primarily and principally related to an act."[58] A virtue is "a good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use" and, in the case of grace-infused virtues, "which God works in us, without us."[59] The function of virtues is to shape our character: they are good qualities that we develop that make us more like God. Rather than simply prescribing the bounds of moral behavior, they encourage us to pursue moral excellence. Thus, a woman who develops the virtue of justice, for example, will be a just woman: her character will be that of someone who is just and fair. Furthermore, in order to develop any one virtue completely, all other virtues must be developed as well; the godly character that a person develops through the habituation of virtue is one that must incorporate all aspects of virtue.[60] A truly virtuous person is not simply temperate, nor is she merely courageous: she must have temperance and courage, moderated by the virtue of justice and informed by the virtue of practical wisdom. The development of virtue is so necessary for Aquinas's ethic that he devotes the entire second half of his work on

---

57. The concept of "theosis" or divinization is common within Eastern Christianity. Aquinas refers to the goal of the union of our intellect with God but places primary emphasis on "the vision of the Divine Essence" (or the "Beatific Vision"); see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia IIae, Q3, A8. See also Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso,* Canto XXX and *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 1028.

58. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia IIae, Q49, A3.

59. Ibid., Ia IIae, Q55, A4.

60. Ibid., Ia IIae, Q65, A1.

morality to specific questions related to virtue. Virtue is so crucial for no other reason than because it is through the development of virtue that we are able to draw near to God.

Virtue also fits into a Mormon moral theory. Lorenzo Snow said, "As [humans are] now, God once was; as God is now [humans] may be."[61] If our eternal happiness depends upon morality, and our eternal happiness is in being like God, then our morality should direct us toward sharing the same characteristics as God. Morality cannot, then, be reduced merely to action; it must incorporate behaviors and characteristics that make it easier to be good and more difficult to do evil. To reach the end of being like God "is not simply to avoid spontaneous or habitual wrongdoing, it is to replace the *desire* for wrong . . . with the disposition or desire for good."[62] Virtues are primarily "in reference to act," or are "operative habits," that is, they incline us to act in good ways rather than evil ways.[63] Finally, virtues are part of the thirteenth article of faith, as Latter-day Saints believe in "being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous and in doing good to all [people]." Aside from the explicit mention of virtue, this is a list of virtues: honesty, chastity, truth, and beneficence are all listed by Aquinas as virtues.[64] "Being" these things means precisely developing them as characteristics, having them as part of our nature or personality. The ethical method of cultivating certain qualities that make it easier for us to do good and that help us to become like God is a form of virtue ethics, one that, per Aquinas, can be integrated into a larger ethical method based on natural law, at least insofar as these virtues will enable us to more easily follow the dictates

---

61. Lorenzo Snow, *Teachings of Lorenzo Snow,* edited by Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Publishers, 1984), 1.

62. Madsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Ethics," 39 (emphasis original).

63. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia IIae, Q55, A2.

64. Ibid., IIa IIae, Qq 31, 109, 145, 151.

of our consciences (or the promptings of the Holy Spirit) and help us avoid violating divine promptings.

A Thomistic natural law theory will be useful, though certainly not complete, for a Mormon ethic. In Aquinas's thought, moral actions are based on a thin moral principle rooted in our nature as divinely created beings with rationality (universal), the adherence to which brings about happiness (teleological), through the development of a good moral character (virtue), which is actualized through good acts chosen through discernment (conscience/practical wisdom/the promptings of the Holy Spirit), which yields particular judgments for good acts for particular persons in particular circumstances. As the work of Truman Madsen reflecting on the teachings of Joseph Smith shows, these components are central elements of Mormon theology and as such must be taken into consideration in thinking about LDS ethics.

Conclusion

Mormon scripture holds that God continues to reveal important truths pertaining to the salvation of humanity. This may not mean that God determines willy-nilly the content of moral law,[65] but it does mean that human understanding of essential moral principles is subject to God's revelation pertaining to the eternal law. In other words, the words of the modern-day prophets and scriptural texts provide the first source of any principle of ethics. However, in the concrete, complex, and multivalent nature of people's lives, there arise moral questions to which there are no ready answers in Holy Writ.[66] Neither should we expect that a thorough, particular, revealed, and universal morality is possible because of the reality of the variety of concrete experiences and social contexts. Whom one should vote for, how she should manage her finances, whom

---

65. See McCall, "Moral Obligation," 29.

66. See James M. Gustafson, "The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study," *Interpretation* 24, no. 4 (1970): 430–55.

she should marry, how many children she and her spouse should raise, what occupation she should pursue, and other such real questions have important moral weight to them, but the answers to each of these questions will be dependent largely upon the particular relevant details at stake in such questions. It seems inexpedient for one prophetic leader to individually direct seven billion persons on how they should make decisions.

Deontological and utilitarian ethics may be fine for broad social thinking, but they do not fit well within a Mormon theological background. Kantian deontology ignores the eudaemonistic function of Mormon moral thought as well as the contingencies both in general and personal revelation. Utilitarianism ignores any overarching moral principle—whatever is perceived as broadly morally acceptable, or whatever yields greater pleasures, is necessarily morally good. A Mormon moral theory must incorporate the universal as well as the particular and the consequential as well as the intentional.

A natural law ethic of the sort that Aquinas put forth incorporates these elements while simultaneously stressing moral development and progression and the interaction between the divine and the human. In a Mormon context, a natural law ethic would articulate general and specific norms for Latter-day Saints living in particular cultural locations while adhering to the central tenets of Mormon faith. It would encourage the development of godly virtue and sensitivity to the promptings of the Holy Ghost. A Mormon natural law ethic would recast ethical issues not in the light of "Is this a sin?" or "Is there prophetic teaching about this?" but "Does this help me be more like God?" and "Does performing this action cultivate in me an attitude that is more conducive to receiving the guidance of the Holy Ghost or less so?" A Mormon natural law ethic not only is conducive to Mormon teaching but provides a solution whereby moral discussion can go beyond lists of "oughts" and "ought nots" to particular progressions toward divinity.