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INTELLIGENCES AND ZION:  
AN ESSAY IN MORMON POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

**Nathan Oman**<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

Recent years have seen a blossoming of serious philosophical examination of Mormon theology. Writing in the 1950s, the sociologist Thomas O’Dea disparaged Mormonism as a do-it-yourself theology that offered little intellectual rigor or theoretical insight. It is certainly true that Mormonism has yet to achieve anything like the theoretical sophistication that one sees in the philosophical elaboration of traditional Christianity, and there are reasons for believing that such a comprehensive elaboration may not even be possible within Mormonism. Yet a small but increasing number of Mormon and non-Mormon academics are coming to realize that Mormonism does offer rewards to those interested in philosophical theology.

Despite this flowering of interest in philosophical Mormon theology, there has been very little effort to use these insights in other areas of theoretical interest, such as political philosophy. This essay seeks to begin filling that gap by offering an example of how one might use the philosophical discussion of Mormon theology to frame and understand a central issue in contemporary political theory. Much of the debate in American political philosophy in the closing years of the twentieth century revolved around the competing claims of liberalism and communitarianism. This debate can be framed quite well within the context of Mormonism. For Mormons, I will argue that the choice between liberalism and communitarianism can be framed as a conflict between the ontology and the teleology of their theology.

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<sup>1</sup> I welcome comments and responses to this paper. Please email me at nboman@wm.edu.

## **Background**

Liberalism is a term that has been so often misused that it is perhaps better not to attempt to attempt to rescue it. However, there is too much history behind the word and it is too philosophically useful to be abandoned at this late date. Philosophically (as opposed to popularly or journalistically) liberalism refers to the political philosophy that had its genesis in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the work of thinkers such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant. Liberalism sees human beings as autonomous, rights bearing individuals. In this philosophy, the chief aim of politics is to protect the liberty of each citizen to pursue their own vision of the good life and to minimize the reach of collective coercion. Thus in a liberal polity the good is subservient to the right, the political community is seen as nothing more than the aggregation of individuals, and the ultimate unit of political value is the individual. The two recent thinkers most powerfully associated with liberal philosophy in the United States have been John Rawls and Robert Nozick, and they nicely illustrate the differences in an approach that can be taken within liberalism. One of Rawls's central projects is to articulate a vision of distributive justice based on the foundation of individualism and the philosophy of right. In contrast, Nozick's primary project is to defend the desirability of a minimalist state based on an absolutist conception of individual rights. Despite these rather radical differences, both thinkers are firmly within the liberal tradition.

One of the most powerful justifications offered for liberalism was that given by John Stuart Mill in the mid-nineteenth century. Mill's justification for liberalism rested on utilitarianism. Mill argued that a regime that maximized the amount of personal liberty consistent with like liberty for others would on the whole maximize the total utility to society. In an era that was becoming increasingly skeptical of metaphysical

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claims -- Jeremy Bentham famously prefigured the age by calling natural rights “nonsense on stilts” -- Mill’s formulation of liberalism became very popular. By the middle of the twentieth century the consensus in Anglo-American political philosophy was that utilitarianism could, if properly articulated, provide a full justification for liberal polity and effectively guide political decision-making. However, in the decades following World War II, the faith in utilitarianism faltered a variety of reasons. In its place many liberal thinkers, most notably John Rawls, turned to a Kantian ethics to justify liberalism on the basis of a deontological notion of individual rights. More recently, the utilitarian justification for liberalism has enjoyed a renaissance in the work of Richard Posner and others in the law and economics movement.

The postwar years also saw a more powerful challenge to liberalism, especially as liberal political thinkers turned to increasingly Kantian justifications for liberalism. This challenge came from a spectrum of communitarian thinkers such as Michael Oakshott, Hannah Arendt, and Douglas MacIntyre. A leading philosopher in this group is Michael Sandel. According to Sandel, liberalism requires that the principle of justice – of right – function as an “Archimedean point” prior to any other political or social value. However, Sandel argues that arguments offered in favor of justice by liberals cannot support so primary a position for justice. At the limit of justice, Sandel argues, we are inevitably confronted with the question of the good. Liberalism thus rests on a philosophically unsustainable ambition: the hegemony of justice without reference to the good. Hannah Arendt offered a critique of liberalism from a somewhat different position. Arendt’s philosophy is an attempt to recapture the ancient ideal of the public or the political. With Aristotle, she argues that it is only in the political or public arena that human beings become free and fully human. Contrary to liberalism, Arendt argues that freedom is

constituted by the political rather than vice versa as in contractarian philosophies.

These critics of liberalism share a common commitment to a more robust notion of the political community than one finds in liberalism. An example of this reaction to liberalism can be seen in the civic republican movement that gathered force in American legal theory during the late 1980s and 1990s. Rather than conceptualizing politics as a process of protecting rights and liberty, these theorists looked to a robust notion of the public good and the priority of the community in constituting the individual. This emphasis on the primacy character of the community led them to argue that illiberal policies – such as the suppression of pornography – were justified if they resulted from, and served to preserve, the fundamental character of a community as defined by a politically virtuous and civically involved citizenry.

This is a conflict that can be viewed through the lens of Mormon theology and philosophy. The issues of individuality, community, and their relationship at play in the debate between liberalism and its critics are also acted out within Mormonism. This opens up two possibilities. The first is that Mormons with an interest in these issues have a way of analyzing them that does not require an intellectual divorce of their religious selves from the rest of their reason. The second is that those interested in the debate can see it refracted through a new prism. While not guaranteeing useful insights, seeing familiar issues played out in an unfamiliar language and landscape always offers the possibility of new insights.

### **A Liberal Ontology**

The *Doctrine and Covenants* declares, “Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or light and truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.” (D&C 93:29) Along similar lines, Joseph Smith taught in the King Follett Discourse:

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We say that God himself is a self-existent being. . . . Man . . . exist upon the same principles. . . . The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is coequal with God himself. . . . The intelligence of spirits has no being, nether will it have an end. . . . There never was a time when there were not spirits; for they are co-equal with our Father in heaven.<sup>2</sup>

These statements constitute the classical rejection in Mormon theology of the ex nihilo creation of the soul. In its place is a vision of uncreated “intelligences,” existing with God from eternity to eternity.

There is no definitive consensus about the precise nature of the primal and uncreated intelligence. With Mormonism’s strong emphasis on progression, it is not surprising that many LDS thinkers have interpreted intelligence as referring to some simpler or primary order of existence from which man’s current spirit has evolved. Thus, for example, Orson Pratt elaborated the concept of intelligence into a theory of pansychism where all matter is animated with lesser or greater degrees of intelligence.<sup>3</sup> In a simplification of Pratt’s theory, Bruce R. McConkie taught that intelligence referred to an undifferentiated “spirit substance” that did not possess individuality until organized into a spirit at some point by God.

However, the most extensive elaboration of the concept of intelligence is that offered by B.H. Roberts. According to Roberts, intelligence refers to a primal, uncreated, core of individuality in each soul. “[A] proper immortality . . . means the eternal existence of the ‘ego’ . . . before birth as well as existence after death.”<sup>4</sup> According to Roberts, the “ego” or intelligence is indestructible, even by God, and has existed with him without beginning. Roberts’s elaboration also comes the closest to being an official

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<sup>2</sup> JOSEPH SMITH, TEACHINGS OF THE PROPHET JOSEPH SMITH 352 – 53 (Joseph Fielding Smith ed., 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Pratt’s thinking also seems to have been influenced by the idea of the omnipresence of the Holy Spirit that is elaborated in the *Lectures of Faith*.

<sup>4</sup> B.H. Roberts, *Immortality of Man* reprinted in 2 B.H. ROBERTS, SCRAPBOOK 21, 23 (Lynn Pulsipher ed. 1991).

declaration of the church on this matter. In an early twentieth century article in the *Improvement Era*, Roberts laid out his full theory of the eternal individual. Although the church shied away from giving a formal endorsement of the theory, the article was prefaced by a sentence stating:

Elder Roberts submitted the following paper to the First Presidency and a number of the Twelve Apostles, none of whom found anything objectionable in it, or contrary to the revealed word of God, and therefore favor its publication.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, because of the sophistication of its elaboration Roberts's thought has provided a starting point for most of those involved in the current philosophical discussion of Mormon theology.

Sterling McMurrin maintained that "the pluralistic metaphysics [of Mormonism] . . . logically supports Mormon liberalism."<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, McMurrin is not clear about what sense in which he is using the word "liberalism." He seems to be using the term to refer to theological liberalism and some kind of optimistic humanism. However, despite McMurrin's ambiguity, his statement also points to the congruence between Mormonism's ontology of the human soul and the political philosophy of liberalism. This link is most readily apparent in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and its later life in liberal political theory.

Kant's philosophy is played out against the background Descartes, Newton, and Hume. Like Descartes, Kant is interested in the problem of how one justifies knowledge of the world independently existing "out there." Newton had impressed him as an example of real and certain knowledge, and Hume had convinced him of the inability of

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 21. Roberts himself first qualified his theory, stating "I am in no way deluded with the idea that my writings are setting forth in any authoritative way the doctrines of the Church." *Id.* at 22. He went on, however, to maintain that "if credence is to be given at all to what is revealed upon the subject, [his theory] of the eternity of the intelligent entity in many must be accepted as true." *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> STERLING McMURRIN, *THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE MORMON RELIGION* 56 (Signature Books ed. 2000).

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empiricism to account for this knowledge. Kant's solution was radical and far reaching. He argued that the experience of the world is structured by human thought, in particular the concepts of space, time, and causality. These concepts are necessary elements of our experience of the world, but they are not themselves given by that experience. At the same time, it is impossible to doubt these categories of thought in the manner of Descartes. According to Kant, we can have knowledge of the world, but it is never a world "out there" or a knowledge that comes purely from experience. We know the phenomenal world, but it is a world that we participate in creating.

The question naturally arises, "What is the nature of the self or ego that is doing this knowing of the world?" First, the ego's knowledge is structured by the categories mentioned above. Second, the ego itself is not controlled by these categories. The ego observes a world in which causation holds sway and every object is the effect of some previous cause. However, in order for this world to be intelligible the ego itself cannot be merely an effect. It is free. Furthermore, this fundamental ego is transcendent and universal. Everyone who experiences the phenomenal world does so through the categories of causation, extension, and time and every knowing ego is, of necessity, free.

From this transcendental ego, Kant draws ethical conclusions. The phenomenal world is filled with objects, but reason dictates that people cannot be treated as objects. To do so would be to deny the necessity of the transcendental ego. Thus, the individual must always be treated as an end in and of itself. In this conclusion, it is easy to see the autonomous, rights bearing individual of philosophical liberalism. Furthermore, Kant's philosophy decisively subordinates any notion of the collective to the rights of the individual. It prioritizes the right to the good. When liberal thinkers such as John Rawls state that "the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the

calculus of social interests”<sup>7</sup> they are professing a profoundly Kantian ethic.

With this background, the link between Mormon ontology and liberalism becomes clearer. The intelligence of the human soul that is coeternal with God seems to have the characteristics of Kant’s transcendental ego, or at least those characteristics that drive Kant’s moral theory. Indeed, in specifying the characteristics of intelligence, Roberts used language that seems very much at home in a Kantian political theory:

There is in that complex thing we call man an intelligent entity, uncreated, self-existent, indestructible . . . . [I]ntelligence is the entity’s chief characteristic. . . . [T]here goes with this idea of intelligence a power of choosing one thing instead of another, one state rather than another.<sup>8</sup>

Mormon scriptures draw the distinction between the freedom of the subjective intelligence and the necessity of the causal universe. They speak of “things to act and things to be acted upon” (2 Ne 2:14) and note that man was to “act for himself” (2 Ne 2:15). Roberts made the distinction explicit.

[T]here is a difference between the thinking essence or substance and that which has or manifests mechanical force merely . . . as also there is a difference between intelligence viewed as ‘the light of truth’ – the power by which truth is discerned – and substances capable merely of manifesting chemical force dependent upon union in certain combinations and proportions with other substances.<sup>9</sup>

Intelligences thus seem to have the properties of freedom and reason ascribed to Kant’s transcendental ego, and like the transcendental ego, intelligence has necessary existence. For Kant the necessity of the transcendental ego lies in way in which it constitutes the phenomenal universe. For Mormonism, the necessity of intelligence lies in the fundamental ontological pluralism of the universe. Both of these philosophies, it seems, could equally well support philosophical liberalism.

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<sup>7</sup> JOHN RAWLS, *A THEORY OF JUSTICE* 4 (rev. ed. 1999).

<sup>8</sup> B.H. Roberts, *Immortality of Man* reprinted in 2 B.H. ROBERTS, *SCRAPBOOK* 21, 26 (Lynn Pulsipher ed. 1991).

<sup>9</sup> B.H. ROBERTS, *THE TRUTH, THE WAY, THE LIFE* 77 (John Welch ed. 2d ed. 1996).

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There is a second way in which Mormonism could support a liberal political theory. While many liberals adopt a Kantian ethic, his rationalism and abstraction have not always appealed to Anglo-American philosophy. The result has been the reformulation of the Kantian ethic by John Rawls. According to Michael Sandel, Rawls seeks “to preserve Kant’s deontological teaching by replacing Germanic obscurities with a domesticated metaphysics less vulnerable to the charge of arbitrariness and more congenial to the Anglo-American temper.”<sup>10</sup> Rawls does this by means of an intellectual device that he calls “the original position.”<sup>11</sup> He engages in a thought experiment in which people construct a society behind a veil of ignorance that keeps them from knowing what position they would occupy in such a society. Justice is simply the choices that free and reasonable people would make in this original position.

The Mormon ontology of the soul leads to a novel explanation of the relationship of man, God, and the human condition. In a system animated by the doctrine of ex nihilo creation, the relationship is rather simple: God creates man and the world from nothing through divine fiat. Human experience and human suffering are therefore traceable back to an act of creation (or noncreation) on the part of God. Such a formulation, however, is not available to Mormonism. Since intelligence is coeternal with God, creation alone cannot operate as an adequate account of the necessity of human experience or the relationship of man and God. The answer to this conundrum in Mormon theology bears a striking resemblance to Rawls’s original position.

According to Mormon theology, prior to the creation of the world God held a grand council in heaven in which the future structure of experience was to be decided.

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<sup>10</sup> MICHAEL SANDEL, LIBERALISM AND THE LIMITS OF JUSTICE 13 – 14 (1981).

<sup>11</sup> JOHN RAWLS, A THEORY OF JUSTICE 102 (rev. ed. 1999).

Two plans were offered. One involved a future “whereby all would be safely conducted through the career of mortality, bereft of freedom to act and agency to choose, so circumscribed that they would be compelled to do right – that not one soul would be lost.”<sup>12</sup> Another involved a world of travail and wickedness, but it also included freedom and the possibility of righteousness. According to Mormon scripture, every soul that came to earth accepted the second plan.

This theodicy, which flows from the Mormon ontology of the soul, has strong resonance with liberalism. The primacy of agreement in justifying a state of affairs is a striking parallel to the contractarian justifications for the state offered by liberal political theory. Furthermore, the mode of justification involved in this story seems to mirror that offered by Rawls. The conditions that would accept ex ante without full knowledge of one’s personal circumstances are offered as being normatively justified. In Mormonism it is the acceptance of a life of real moral possibility coupled with real moral risks. In Rawls, it is a society governed by the priority of the individual to the collective and the demands of justice to the demands of the good.

In conclusion, the ontology of the Mormon soul and the mode of moral justification occasioned by that ontology seem to point toward a liberal political theory. Both Mormonism and liberalism view the individual as being necessary, free, and reasonable. Both employ the moral discourse of agreement and original positions. Mormon ontology seems to provide all of the ingredients necessary to construct a Kantian justification for individualism, justice, and rights. In short, the ontology of Mormonism seems to point towards a commitment to liberalism.

### **A Communitarian Teleology**

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<sup>12</sup> JAMES E. TALMAGE, JESUS THE CHRIST 8 –9 (35th ed. 1963).

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Despite the aggressive individualism of its concept of intelligence, Mormonism presents a soteriology of interdependence. This fact is perhaps most dramatically illustrated in the related concepts of sealings and salvation for the dead. Toward the end of his ministry, Joseph Smith revealed that faithful Latter-day Saints could be baptized vicariously for those who had died without hearing “the fullness of the gospel.” However, baptism for the dead is more than a chance for altruism toward those on the other side of the veil. In 1842, Joseph Smith taught:

And now, my dearly beloved brethren and sisters, let me assure you that these are principles in relation to the dead and the living that cannot be lightly passed over, as pertaining to our salvation. For their salvation is necessary and essential to our salvation, as Paul says concerning the fathers -- that they without us cannot be made perfect -- neither can we without our dead be made perfect. (D&C 128:15)

Thus, the concept of salvation for the dead is actually an affirmation of the ultimate interdependence of individual salvations. If the primordial intelligences existed in glorious independence, unconditioned even by God, salvation for the dead suggests that the glory of exaltation can only be achieved and experienced in the company of others.

With the introduction of the temple ordinances and the sealing rituals, the necessity of interdependence in the hereafter was even more forcefully emphasized. In these ordinances, the power of God literally connects individuals in a bond without which they could not maintain an eternal connection.<sup>13</sup> Joseph Smith taught, “[T]he earth will be smitten with a curse unless there is a welding link of some kind or other between the fathers and the children.” (D&C 128:18) The language of welding has been used

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed LDS scripture suggests that the scope of this power is very broad indeed. In an 1843 revelation the Lord said:

And verily I say unto you, that the conditions of this law are these: All covenants, contracts, bonds obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations, that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, of him who is anointed, both as well for time and for eternity, and that too most holy, by revelation and commandment through the medium of mine anointed, whom I have appointed on the earth to hold this power . . . Are of no efficacy, virtue, or force in and after the resurrection from the dead; for all contracts that are not made unto this end have an end when men are dead. (D&C 132:7)

repeatedly to describe the process of connecting the human family. Brigham Young taught:

We are called, as it has been told you, to redeem the nations of the earth. The fathers cannot be made perfect without us; we cannot be made perfect without the fathers. There must be this chain in the holy Priesthood; it must be welded together from the latest generation that lives on the earth back to Father Adam, to bring back all that can be saved and placed where they can receive salvation and a glory in some kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

The second way in which Mormon teleology reflects a vision of interdependence can be found in the concept of Zion. From its founding, Mormonism has been focused on the attempt to realize the ideal City of God. In the nineteenth century this ambition took a very concrete form:

For the Latter-day Saints, the new American Jerusalem meant a real place, whose residents were distinguished by the way they lived. Geographically, Zion was the Holy City. Socially, Zion was a divine society, an organized community that would enjoy the promise of redemption in this life and a life of glory in the next. In the world to come, heaven would be right here on an earth brightened with its own celestial glory. For the Latter-day Saints in the 1830s, Missouri was both the literal site of the biblical Eden and the sacred place for the Saints of the last days as well as the place of eternal promise, a heaven on earth now and forever.<sup>15</sup>

Zion represents an ideal community based on charity and unity. “And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them.” (Moses 7:18) The most dramatic instantiations of this ideal had to be abandoned in the face of federal persecution at the end of the nineteenth century, but Zion is an ideal that continues to resonate within Mormonism.

LDS prophets continue to preach its significance:

If we are to build that Zion of which the prophets have spoken and of which the Lord has given might promise, we must set aside our consuming selfishness. We

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<sup>14</sup> BRIGHAM YOUNG, DISCOURSES OF BRIGHAM YOUNG 407 (John A. Widstoe ed. 1976). In addition, Joseph Smith repeatedly used the metaphor. *See, e.g.*, 4 JOSEPH SMITH, HISTORY OF THE CHURCH 585 (B.H. Roberts, ed. 1980) (Hereinafter HC); HC 5:499; 5:517; JOSEPH SMITH, THE WORDS OF JOSEPH SMITH 229 (Ehat and Cook eds., 1984). In addition, John Taylor used the image. *See* JOHN TAYLOR, GOSPEL KINGDOM 71-72 (G. Homer Durham ed., 1948). I am indebted to Jared Hickman for these citations and for drawing my attention to the recurrence of this metaphor in LDS teachings.

<sup>15</sup> GLEN M. LEONARD, NAUVOO: A PLACE OF PEACE, A PEOPLE OF PROMISE 6 (2002).

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must rise above our love of comfort and ease, and in the very process of effort and struggle, even in our extremity, we shall become better acquainted with our God.<sup>16</sup>

The Mormon concept of Zion, however, represents more than a Utopian vision of a particular sort of community. It is intimately tied to the LDS concept of salvation.

Zion represents the God's dwelling place and man's ascent into God's presence. Mormon scripture captures this connection in the story of the City of Enoch, a Zion community taken by God from the earth to be his dwelling place.

And Enoch continued his preaching in righteousness unto the people of God. And it came to pass in his days, that he built a city that was called the City of Holiness, even Zion. . . . And it came to pass that the Lord showed unto Enoch all the inhabitants of the earth; and he beheld, and lo, Zion, in process of time, was taken up into heaven. And the Lord said unto Enoch: Behold my abode forever. (Moses 7:19,21)

Thus the striving for Zion is linked with the striving for salvation, and the realization of Zion is linked with the salvific return to God's presence. In short, the ultimate telos of mankind is instantiated in a particular vision of the good community.

The teleology of LDS theology – Zion and the metaphysically joined human family – is communitarian in at least two senses. First it presents a vision of the individual that is intersubjective. For liberal philosophy – and the LDS ontology of intelligences – individuals are constituted within themselves. Each subject exists as a subject independent of other subjects. Any relationship that the subjects have with one another is purely accidental and do not implicate the fundamental nature of the individual. Rather, the individual is decisively prior to the community. Thus,

[liberalism] rules out the possibility of a public life in which, for good or ill, the identity as well as the interests of the participants could be at stake. And it rules out the possibility that common purposes and ends could inspire more or less expansive self-understandings and so define a community in the constitutive sense, a community describing the subject and not just the object of shared

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<sup>16</sup>Gordon B. Hinckley, *Our Mission of Saving*, ENSIGN Nov. 1991, 52.

aspirations.<sup>17</sup> Communitarian thinking reverses this priority. Aristotle argued that individuals were constituted by their communities. For him, a human being could only become fully human in the context of the polis – the political community. Outside of that context a man was either a wild beast or a god. Thus on Aristotle's view the relationship of a subject to other subjects is not accidental but necessary. One cannot speak meaningfully about the nature of an individual without also talking about the community which defines that individual.

Within the theology of sealings and Zion, individuals are defined intersubjectively. Our relationship to others places our fundamental nature – saved or not saved; greater glory or lesser glory – at issue. “[T]hey without us cannot be made perfect -- neither can we without [them] be made perfect.” (D&C 128:15) The image of welding suggests that the connection is not accidental to our nature but constitutive of it. In being sealed we are transformed. We become someone different that we were before. We are melted, reformed, and joined. Zion, likewise, is a concept that suggests intersubjectivity. “They were of one heart.” (Moses 7:18) Within the Zion hoped for and worked for in Mormonism, individuals seem to become identified with each other necessarily. It thus represents a broader, communal instantiation of the intersubjectivity alluded to by Jesus in the Gospel of John, where in the Intercessory Prayer he identifies the intersubjectivity of the godhead with the intersubjectivity of his disciples. “And the glory which thou gavest me, I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them; and thou in me, that they may be perfect in one” (John 17:22-23) In contrast to liberal theory, the relationships of individuals is a necessary component of their natures.

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<sup>17</sup> MICHAEL SANDEL, *LIBERALISM AND THE LIMITS OF JUSTICE* 62 (2d ed. 1998).

Indeed, to the extent that Mormonism sees human beings as gods in embryo, it is striking that at least one Mormon philosopher has identified interconnectedness as the essence of divinity in LDS theology. “Divinity arises from a relationship of unity in oneness.”<sup>18</sup>

The second affinity between LDS soteriology and communitarianism is that it presents a vision of human nature that is teleological. Liberalism rests on the assumption that individuals as individuals can be defined and understood logically prior to the particular vision of the good that they pursue. It is this logical separation between subjects and the objects that they pursue that allows liberalism to formulate universal principles of justice that hold true regardless of the vision of the good held by particular individuals. Put another way, it is only in virtue of the fact that individuals can be defined without reference to their ends that the right can be given priority over the good. However, as communitarian critics have pointed out:

[A] self so thoroughly independent as this rules out any conception of the good . . . bound up with possession [of a vision of the good] in the constitutive sense. It rules out the possibility of any attachment . . . able to reach beyond our values and sentiments to engage our identity itself.<sup>19</sup>

Mormon soteriology, however, suggest that individuals cannot be completely defined without reference to their ends. One cannot be “made perfect” – completed, fully realized – without entering into a particular vision of the good life – eternal families, Zion. This connection between human nature and the good undermines the liberal project of prioritizing the justice over virtue, the right over the good.

### **A Caveat on Zion and Distributive Justice**

In the foregoing section I discuss Zion as a possible source for a communitarian philosophy on the basis of Mormon theology. At this point, it seems appropriate to add a

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<sup>18</sup> BLAKE OSTLER, *EXPLORING MORMON THOUGHT: THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD* 455 (2001).

<sup>19</sup> MICHAEL SANDEL, *LIBERALISM AND THE LIMITS OF JUSTICE* 62 (2d ed. 1998).

few thoughts about Zion and the concept of distributive justice. Many “progressive” Mormons find the concept of Zion extremely attractive because of its vision of an egalitarian distribution of resources. “And the Lord called his people Zion, because . . . there was no poor among them.” (Moses 7:18) For example, Mormons for Equality and Social Justice, a group of Latter-day Saints interested in advancing progressive politics, explicitly invokes the ideal of Zion and argues for more generous government welfare programs.<sup>20</sup> In the previous section, I invoked Zion as a possible Mormon basis for a communitarian political philosophy. However, it would be a mistake to assume that I am implying that egalitarian views of distributive justice are necessarily communitarian, or that I see the communitarian aspect of Zion as being its concept of distributive justice.

First, it is simply not true that communitarian political theories are necessarily more friendly to redistributive policies than liberal political theories. For example, Edmund Burke, whose conservatism was deeply rooted in a communitarian allegiance to the value of rooted institutions, did not see in his political philosophy any support for the redistribution of wealth. Second, it is a mistake to associate liberalism only with non-egalitarian visions of distributive justice. Certainly, one must acknowledge the historical link between liberalism and the kind of *laissez-faire*, free market economics that progressives associate with the unjust distribution of social resources. For example, many nineteenth-century liberals saw a necessary connection between liberal philosophy and largely unregulated markets. However, there are liberal theorists who forcefully argue for an egalitarian conception of distributive justice. Most notably, John Rawls has

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<sup>20</sup> See Letter from Mormons for Equality and Social Justice to Senator Orrin Hatch, 2 July 2002 *available at* <http://www.gomakecontact.com/mesj/mesj-literature/literature.html> (visited 18 November 2002) (encouraging Senator Hatch to support more generous welfare policies). See generally Mission Statement *available at* <http://www.gomakecontact.com/mesj/about-us/about.html#> (visited 18 November 2002) (invoking scriptures describing egalitarian property distribution in Zion as a basis for progressive political action).

advanced a theory of justice based on liberal individualism and the priority of the right to the good that nevertheless justifies the aggressive redistribution of wealth.

While, I do not deny that one might construct an argument about distributive justice on the basis of the concept of Zion, I invoke Zion for a different reason. My argument is that it seems to suggest a vision of human nature at odds with the liberal assumptions of autonomous individuality. The distinction that I am interested in is not between egalitarian or non-egalitarian political theories. Rather it is with how political theories conceptualize the relationship between individuals and communities and the relative priority of the concepts of right and good. The important distinction between communitarianism and liberalism is that they provide different categories with which to understand and justify political decisions.

### **The Value of a Problematic**

It then might be asked, what is the significance of the distinction between communitarian and liberal political theories? Why does it matter? The answer to this question lies in the issue of whether or not the language and arguments that we use in political discussions are coherent and compelling. In October conference of 1999, President Hinckley offered an account of why the Church becomes involved in political issues. He stated, “We regard it as not only our right but our duty to oppose those forces which we feel undermine the moral fiber of society.”<sup>21</sup> This statement invokes a powerfully communitarian image a politics. To speak of the “moral fiber of society” implies an interconnectedness of identity and activity that suggests “possibility that common purposes and ends could inspire more or less expansive self-understandings and so define a community in the constitutive sense, a community describing the subject

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<sup>21</sup>Gordon B. Hinckley, *Why We Do Some of the Things We Do*, ENSIGN, Nov. 1999, 52.

and not just the object of shared aspirations.”<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, writing in the nineteenth century in response to laws punishing polygamy, President George Q. Cannon argued, “So long as we do not intrude upon our fellow-men or interfere with their rights and happiness, it is not their right to punish us.”<sup>23</sup> He repeatedly hammers away at the claim that Mormon polygamy does not harm others or encroach on their “rights.” Although he never quotes or cites him, many of President Cannon's arguments in favor of religious liberty for polygamy are reminiscent of those made twenty years earlier by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*. Mill, discussing “the language of downright persecution which breaks out . . . [about] the remarkable phenomenon of Mormonism,”<sup>24</sup> wrote, “[I]t is difficult to see on what principles but those of tyranny they can be prevented from living there under what laws they please, provided they commit no aggression on other nations, and allow perfect freedom of departure to those who are dissatisfied with their ways.”<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein, President Cannon asks, “Who has been coerced by us? Towards whom have we been aggressors?”<sup>26</sup> The entire language of moral and personal autonomy that Cannon invokes is as profoundly liberal as is the moral language of President Hinckley is profoundly communitarian.

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<sup>22</sup> MICHAEL SANDEL, *LIBERALISM AND THE LIMITS OF JUSTICE* 62 (2d ed. 1998).

<sup>23</sup> GEORGE Q. CANNON, *REVIEW OF THE DECISION OF THE SUPREME COURT IN THE CASE OF GEO. REYNOLDS VS. THE UNITED STATES* 45 (1879).

<sup>24</sup> JOHN STUART MILL, *ON LIBERTY AND OTHER ESSAYS* 101 (John Gray ed. 1991) (1859).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 102. Mill, of course, had no particular admiration for Mormonism. In the same passage he observed:

Much might be said on the unexpected and instructive fact, that an alleged new revelation, and a religion founded on it, the produce of palpable imposture, not even supported by the *prestige* of extraordinary qualities in its founder, is believed by hundreds of thousands, and has been made the foundation of a society, in the age of newspapers, railways, and the electric telegraphy.

*Id.* at 101.

<sup>26</sup> GEORGE Q. CANNON, *REVIEW OF THE DECISION OF THE SUPREME COURT IN THE CASE OF GEO. REYNOLDS VS. THE UNITED STATES* 47 (1879).

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Reconciling these two approaches or deciding which is correct is beyond the scope of this paper. It may be that communitarian and liberal arguments can be fitted into a single coherent system. It may be that one approach is decisively correct while the other approach is decisively mistaken. Nothing in this essay provides any way of adjudicating such points, either within or without of Mormonism. What this essay does provide is a problematic, a way of thinking about the issues in peculiarly Mormon terms. Clearly both elements of each theory can be found within Mormon theology. If their placement were random, then it seems that LDS doctrine would offer nothing more than a grab bag of proof texts for Mormon partisans of one side of the other of the debate. However, this is not the case. There is a pattern to the distribution of ideas, a pattern that suggests a movement from liberal origins toward a communitarian telos.

It is within this paradigm that Mormons must confront this philosophical divide. It is not clear that the paradigm itself offers an answer to the question. One might argue that origins and ontology should be privileged over goals and process. Politics, it could be argued, should be based on what is universal, and in a theology that offers the possibility of differing points along a continuum of connectedness it may be that only our origins are completely shared. Such a view need not preclude the possibility of Zion and community, but it would be conceived of in liberal terms. In his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Robert Nozick argues that a minimalist liberal state is desirable precisely because it allows the possibility for groups of free individuals to pursue their “private” utopias.

On the other hand, one might argue that the language of freedom and agency derived from Mormon ontology is too thin to support any meaningful sort of politics. One might argue that human beings are defined by their connections with others, and thus such connections cannot be treated as accidental or politically irrelevant. Communities

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must be thought of as communities and not simply as aggregations of individuals precisely because our condition in the second estate means that who we are is always constituted in part by the community in which we find ourselves embedded. We may have occupied some idealized liberal position of autonomy in the shadowy time before the council in heaven, but it is far too late in the play for us to now speak in terms of our origins.

Which of these arguments is correct and what other arguments one might make is not an issue that I take a position on in this essay. However, what these arguments do suggest is that even if it is difficult to identify uniquely Mormon answers in the liberal-communitarian debate, it is possible to identify a uniquely Mormon way of carrying on that debate.