# Traditional Christian and Mormon views of God and Their Compatibility with the moral Theistic Argument: An Exercise in Ramified Natural Theology

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## Abstract

In 2002, Francis Beckwith authored a chapter in *The New Mormon Challenge* in which he argued that the Mormon (LDS) worldview does not adequately ground moral laws. LDS philosopher Blake Ostler offered a response to Beckwith's argument and attempted to demonstrate LDS's theism's compatibility with objective moral values and duties. A substantial portion of Ostler's work argues for a reinterpretation of Joseph Smith's teaching about God that he dubs "kingship monotheism." Christian scholars have yet to respond to Ostler's critique of Beckwith's argument or his grounding of objective moral values and duties within an LDS worldview. This paper represents a beginning of such a response. It argues that the moral argument for God's existence provides good evidence for Christian theism and serves as a critique of LDS theism.

## Keywords

objective morality, ramified natural theology, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, LDS, the moral argument for God's existence, monarchotheism

## 1. Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed a resurgence of metaphysical thinking and a renaissance in Christian philosophy (Craig and Moreland 2012, ix). This renewed interest in Christian philosophy "served to reinvigorate natural theology, that branch of theology that seeks to provide warrant for belief in God's existence apart from the resources of authoritative, propositional revelation." The moral argument is regularly featured as one of the important natural theological arguments for God's existence (see further Beckwith, Craig, and Moreland 2004; Craig 2002; Craig and Moreland 2012; Moreland, Meister, and Sweis 2013).

Theistic religions may differ regarding what they hold to be true and real about God. Philosophers and theologians may employ natural theology to discriminate between religious outlooks. This way of using natural theology has been called ramified natural theology (Swinburne 2004, 533). Thus employed, natural theology becomes useful in arguing for not merely theism, but for a particular brand of theism.

The metaphysics of the divine that has developed in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) differs considerably from the metaphysics of the divine in traditional Christian theism. This project is an application of ramified natural theology, attempting to answer the question, "Which religion, LDS or traditional Christian theism, is more likely to be true based on the results of natural theology?" Specifically, this paper will

look closely at the evidence for God produced by the moral argument for God's existence.

The first part of this paper will offer a popular form of the moral argument for God's existence. While this paper will not offer an exhaustive explication and defense of the moral argument, a brief examination will highlight two features of the moral argument: (1) It will show the argument to be a broadly defensible argument for the existence of God, and (2) it will highlight the metaphysical commitments entailed by the argument.

The second part of this paper will address the question, "Can biblical Christianity make use of the moral argument for God's existence?" This section will evaluate biblical data and pay special attention to the Euthyphro dilemma.

The third part of this paper will address the question, "Can LDS theology make use of the moral argument for God's existence?" This section will highlight the argument advanced by Francis Beckwith against traditional Mormon theology from the moral argument, along with LDS philosopher Blake Ostler's response to Beckwith. Ostler defends traditional Mormon theology from Beckwith's argument and advances a new theology, kingship monotheism, as a basis for an LDS appropriation of the moral argument for God's existence. This section will evaluate Ostler's defense of traditional LDS theism and his use of kingship monotheism.

Finally, this paper will offer its verdict concerning the compatibility of the use of the moral argument for God's existence in traditional Christian theology and in LDS theology.

## 2. The Moral Argument

### *2.1 The moral argument presented*

One form of the moral argument has been popularized by the prolific debating of philosopher William Lane Craig. In *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (2003), Craig argues:

- If God did not exist, objective moral values and duties would not exist.
- Objective moral values and duties do exist.
- Therefore, God exists.

This argument takes the form of *modus tollens*:

| Modus Tollens | Craig's Argument |
|---|---|
| P → Q | If atheism (A) → there are no objective moral values or duties (- O) |
| -Q | -(-O) |
| _____ | _____ |
| - P | - A |

### *2.2 The moral argument defended*

An attack on the moral argument will take one of two primary forms. The philosopher either takes an anti-realist position regarding moral values and duties, which denies the reality of moral facts (Copp 2005, 41–42), or affirms objective moral values and duties while claiming some other grounding.

One popular version of the anti-realist position explains our felt experience of morality as owing to the evolutionary process and not to actually existing objective moral obligations. On this view, ethics are "psychological beliefs put in place by natural selection to maintain and

improve our reproductive fitness. There is nothing more to them than that" (Ruse 2012, 65). Though some philosophers embrace this anti-realist position, the consensus seems to be that moral realism fits most naturally with what we seem to be doing in making moral claims and is the default position (Copp 2005, 42). The ubiquity of belief in objective morality is evidenced in our strong insistence on being able to accuse others of wrongdoing, being able to see instances of injustice in the world, being able to improve our morals (rather than simply change them), and being able to point out moral exemplars (Beckwith and Koukl 1998, 61¬–72). Human moral experience imposes duties on us that we understand to lay claim to us in powerful ways; we infer from this experience a realm of objective moral values and duties (Craig and Gorra 2013, 89–90). This paper proceeds on the basis that this reasoning is persuasive and that objective moral values and duties exist.

Atheist philosopher Sam Harris takes the other approach. He believes morality to be objective but does not believe moral values and duties need to be grounded in a divine being to be objective (Harris 2007, 8–24). Harris sees facts about what enables a person to flourish as grounded in biology and psychology. He believes that flourishing provides humans with objectively better or worse ways to seek happiness, and thus, provides an enduring basis for objective morality.

Biology and psychology may account for certain behaviors that support human flourishing, but it is hard to extrapolate from there to a necessary link between fitness and objective morality. Biology can tell us what is advantageous to life, but not that we have an obligation to pursue life or the advantage a behavior confers. As atheist philosopher Alex Rosenberg (2011, 330) opines, "Science has no way to bridge the gap between is and ought." While it may be clear that act $x$ supports another person's well-being

and that act $y$ is detrimental to that person's well-being, it is not clear, on atheistic naturalism, that one is obligated to pursue $x$ rather than $y$.

Harris's theory seems unable to move from descriptive facts about human nature to value judgments about those facts. Pleasure and pain may be real, and evolutionary naturalism may account for these, but what evolutionary naturalism cannot do is link objective value to one of these experiences over another. This flaw is fatal to naturalistic grounding of objective moral values and duties because, in the end, it reduces moral action to actions that promote reproductive fitness, but it can provide no duty to pursue that goal. While naturalistic moral theories abound, they all share this flaw: they can work robustly on a descriptive level, but they fall apart at the substantive level, bearing witness to a lack of objective grounding.

### 2.3 The moral argument: some conclusions

The above has been brief, but it has served to highlight an important metaphysical commitment of the moral argument for God's existence. It appears that to be a moral realist regarding objective moral values and duties, one must have a solid grounding for those objective values and duties. Those values and duties must be grounded in something beyond descriptions of prudence or mere truths about what makes a thing flourish. The moral argument concludes by pointing to God as the only possible grounding of objective moral values and duties. God can endow his creatures with value and is capable of grounding moral truths objectively.

# 3. Biblical Christianity and the Moral Argument

### *3.1 Biblical data*

In the Bible, God creates the heavens and the earth and then places Adam and Eve, whom he created in his image, in a garden. God creates, and in that creation, we see incredible order, design, and purposefulness. In the early parts of Genesis, God also sets out a moral vision for Adam and Eve.

The book of Genesis declares God to be more than creator; he is legislator as well. God's commands give humans the fundamental choice to obey or disobey (Hare 2010, 70). God establishes both a physical world as well as a moral landscape in which Adam and Eve are to dwell. Adam and Eve sin by eating the prohibited fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They assert their own will over and against God's. This is the introduction of sin into the world.

God warned of impending death if they ate the prohibited fruit, and though Adam and Eve did not die immediately, God does hold them accountable. God confronts Adam and Eve in their rebellion in Genesis 3. God announces punishment (Gen 3:14–19) and executes his judgment for their sin (Gen 3:20–24). A death does occur—a substitute that covers their shame and which points to Jesus as the sacrificial death that would pay the penalty of even this sin—and Adam and Eve are cut off from the tree of life, thus relegating them to return eventually to the dust from which they came.

Genesis 1–3 establishes God as the lawgiver who holds his creatures accountable. His commands form the basis for the moral situations that occur. God gives Adam and Eve a short list of commandments, and these describe the objective values and duties Adam and Eve were meant to embrace. They are objective because they issue from a source beyond

human subjective experience. This source is not an abstract and causally disconnected entity, but God himself.

Later in the biblical narrative God reveals himself to Israel at Mount Sinai. There, God's presence is manifested to God's people with smoke, fire, thunder, lightning, and trumpet blasts (Exod 19:16–20). Interestingly, this instance is the only place where God speaks to the whole of God's people corporately (Deut 5:22–27). Even more remarkable, with the Ten Commandments, God gives Israel laws written by his own hand (Exod 31:18, 32:16). While other legislation was kept beside the ark (Deut 31:24–26), these tablets were placed *in* the ark (Exod 25:16). These details underscore the commandments' transcendent source and endurance (Miller 2009, 3). The Ten Commandments form a foundational starting point for moral law from which all the other OT laws flow (p. 13). God is the source of these laws and thus for all the moral laws that flow from this foundation. Just as God told Moses how to be holy in his presence (Exod 3:13–14), this law provides the basis for Israel to live in the presence of their holy God (Lev 19). God did not learn these laws from some other source. He is the final moral grounding for the laws he commands. Isaiah 40:13–14 asks,

> Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?[1]

Of course, these questions all expect and demand the negative, "No one." God does not learn about justice or gain understanding from anybody else. He is from everlasting to everlasting (Ps 90:2) and has always been the source of moral truth.

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1   All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the ESV.

In the NT, Jesus does not teach the same way as other teachers of the law. Teachers of the law appeal to revealed laws and case law to establish right action. Jesus taught differently. This is clear in many places, but Matthew 7:29 recalls how amazed those who heard Jesus teaching were, "for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes." Jesus did not appeal to an outside authority. Instead, he claimed his teachings to be authoritative (Morris 1992, 184). The moral argument requires God to be the source of objective moral values and duties. The God revealed in the OT appears as just that source. Jesus's teachings do not usurp God's authority; rather, he teaches with that same authority. Thus, Jesus's teachings affirm God as the unique source of objective moral values and duties.

Other authors in the NT echo the understanding of God as the moral lawgiver. The apostle Paul teaches that humans are accountable to God's law (Rom 3:19; 1 Cor 6:10). That is, there is a law higher than any human court. God is not mocked (Gal 6:7); all lawbreakers are accountable for their departure from God's objective standard of right and wrong.

James 2:8–13 argues that God is the lawgiver and that the person who breaks one of God's laws is a lawbreaker and thus accountable for judgment. He also understands that faith in Jesus is the basis on which a person is saved from such judgment and that a person with faith will obey God's commands (Jas 2:14–26).

The apostle Peter reminds us that God is the impartial judge who judges each according to their deeds (1 Pet 1:17). Of course, Peter knows we are delivered from that judgment by the "precious blood of Jesus" (1 Pet 1:19), but he expects that truth to purify those who receive Christ's redemption so that they can be "obedient to the truth" (1 Pet 1:22). Peter recognizes God's authority to issue commands and our responsibility to obey. He sees a day of judgment and destruction for those who have not lived up to God's

objective moral values and duties and who have not been redeemed by the blood of Jesus (2 Pet 3:1–7).

The apostle John reveals that "God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). This statement forms the basis for all of the ethical implications John makes in the verses that follow (Kruse 2000, 61). God's character provides the basis for ethical action. It is essentially an ontological claim about God's "moral perfection, truthfulness and impeccability" (Baggett and Campbell 2013, 350). In another of the apostle John's works, the book of Revelation, John showcases God's ultimate justice. God fully and finally judges all of humanity. Revelation 21:11–15 speaks of that judgment day where every person is fully accountable to God for every action.[2] The biblical data posits a God capable of grounding objective moral values and duties—a God whom the moral argument concludes exists.

## 3.2 The Euthyphro dilemma

A perennial difficulty for the moral argument generally stems from Plato's argument known as the Euthyphro dilemma (Dombrowski 2008, 205; Levin 1989, 25). In the dilemma, Euthyphro claims that what all the gods love is holy and that what all the gods hate is unholy, to which Socrates asks his famous question, "Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?" (Plato 1966, 1:10a). This question presents Euthyphro with a vexing dilemma. The first horn of the dilemma is untenable for Euthyphro because it makes holiness independent from the gods. Holiness becomes a property the gods recognize and that does not originate in their will. Yet assenting to the second horn of the dilemma is tantamount to claiming that holy things are just those things that the

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2  See also 1 Pet 4:7.

gods happen to love. This too seems untenable because it appears to make holiness arbitrary. Had the gods loved rape or murder, then those obviously heinous acts would have been holy. If one adopts the first horn and holds that God commands something because it is good, then that person has abandoned God as the source of objective moral values and duties and has instead supposed there to be moral goodness independent of God. If, on the other hand, one adopts the second horn, moral values and duties appear to be arbitrary.

Some defenders of the moral theistic argument have sought a solution to this by suggesting that the Euthyphro dilemma is not a true dilemma and that there is, in fact, a third option (Copan 2013, 93). This strategy disassociates the good from God's commands and sees the good as identical with God's nature. In this case, what is morally good is rooted in God's nature, and God's will or commands flow necessarily from that good nature. God's commands are necessarily good, and they are not arbitrary, for they are constrained by God's nature.

Some philosophers have been unsatisfied with this response. Sinnott-Armstrong asks us to consider a possible world in which God's nature was different. If it was in God's nature to enjoy torturing people's babies for fun, then his commands would flow from his nature and would still command such evil things (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009, 106). Baggett and Walls offer a rejoinder to this sort of argument. They argue that what made Euthyphro so vulnerable to Socrates's criticism was that Euthyphro's gods were morally deficient (Baggett and Walls 2011, 50). However, they argue that the Christian concept of God is one of maximal excellence. The God of Christian theism is not fickle and capricious like the Greek gods. God just is the ultimate transcendent good. The Christian God is also thought to be necessary, that is, existing as himself in every possible world. Thus,

the God of Christian theism is not open to Sinnott-Armstrong's extended arbitrariness objection.

Sinnott-Armstrong would like to keep the pressure on the theist by arguing that even if God could not (due to his nature) ever command us to rape, still if he did, then we would have a moral obligation to rape. This may be trivially true in the same way that saying if it were the case that 2 + 2 = 5 then 2 + 2 ≠ 4. That is trivially true, but nonsensical, just as saying that if God's necessary nature had been other than it is, then the morals that flow from that nature could have been different (Baggett and Walls 2011, 133).

### 3.3 Conclusion of biblical Christian theism and the moral argument

We can conclude that the Bible provides clear teaching that grounds objective moral values and duties in God himself. Traditional Christian theism has, at its core, the metaphysical requirements of the moral argument for God's existence. While devastating to the moral argument regarding the pagan gods in Socrates's day, the Euthyphro dilemma does not threaten the moral argument for God's existence for the traditional Christian theist.

## 4. LDS Theism and the Moral Argument

### 4.1 God in the LDS tradition

Traditional conceptions of God in the LDS tradition, based on Joseph Smith's mature teaching on the nature of God in the King Follett sermon (April 7, 1844) and the Sermon in the Grove (June 16, 1844), hold that the God worshiped by humans is but one being in an infinite chain of gods. While God in LDS thought is often conceived of as perfectly moral, this perfection was acquired by means of a developmental process in which God learned pre-existing laws (Givens 2015, 63). Eternal laws exist independently of God,

and therefore God, to progress, must recognize and embrace those eternal laws (Givens 2015, 60; cf. Pratt 1877, 37; Widtsoe 1932, 175). These laws are not only independent of God, but also out of his control (Robson 1983, 21). Kim McCall articulated several problems with the concept of moral obligation within LDS theology. He notes that within LDS theology, humans do not owe their ultimate existence to God, and both God and humans are subject to eternal laws (McCall 1981, 27).

McCall pushes LDS philosophers to look beyond God for the source of moral obligation since God is a part of nature rather than causally underlying it as in Christian theism (Sears 2000, 78). It is likely due to this problem that LDS philosopher Rex Sears (2000, 73) has opined that moral arguments for God's existence "are virtually absent from the Mormon tradition." In traditional Mormon thinking, God is not the ultimate source of moral values and duties or of power, since, like us, he derives his exalted status from another source based on his obedience to moral laws that exist outside himself. This conceptual difference between LDS and traditional Christian theism may stand behind the minimal usage of this argument by LDS philosophers, but it has not caused philosophers to remain unreflective concerning Mormon theism and the moral argument.

### 4.2 Beckwith's criticism

In his 2002 chapter in *The New Mormon Challenge*, Francis Beckwith claims that the God of LDS theology cannot be the ultimate grounding for objective moral values and duties. He points out that in LDS thought, God was elevated to his divine status in virtue of his obedience to moral laws he was obligated to obey. As Mormon general authority Milton Hunter has remarked, "He became God—an exalted being—through obedience to the same eternal gospel truths that we are given opportunity today to obey"

(Hunter 1945, 104). How did God "become glorified"? Hunter answers, "God undoubtedly took advantage of every opportunity to learn the laws of truth and as He became acquainted with each new verity, He righteously obeyed it" (p. 114). LDS philosopher Truman Madsen concurs: "God himself became God by the mastery of the same ultimate and unchanging conditions to which you and I are subject" (Madsen 1970, 57). It seems that on Mormonism, moral truth is external to and learned by God, and that God cannot thusly be the ultimate source or ground of moral values and duties. Beckwith sees that on LDS theology, if God's decrees or deeds are good, "they are only good because they are consistent with an unchanging moral law that exists apart from him" (Beckwith 2002, 226).

It seems that the traditional LDS view of God is vulnerable to Socrates's criticism discussed in his dialogue with Euthyphro. In LDS thought, morality is not ultimately grounded in God's nature, but God commands what is good after aligning his will to the good. God's commands may be good, but not just because he commands it, but rather because he learned eternal laws and has become a proficient commander of good things, much the same way a human might learn the good and become a proficient commander of good things. Thus, the moral argument for God's existence does not offer proof for the God of traditional LDS theism any more than it offers proof for Euthyphro's gods.

### 4.3 Ostler's defense

LDS philosopher Blake Ostler has argued against Beckwith's conclusion by saying that Beckwith's analysis of God in the LDS tradition is mistaken. Rather than seeing LDS theology as committed to an infinite chain of gods, Ostler sees the God of LDS theology to be the head God over a plurality of lesser gods. This view can be called kingship monotheism, or

monarchotheism. Ostler's interpretation of Joseph Smith's mature teaching rests on two principal arguments. First, he claims that Smith's teaching in the King Follett discourse implies only that the Father was divine prior to becoming mortal and not that God the Father has a father as it is often assumed in LDS theology. Secondly, he claimed that in Smith's Sermon in the Grove, Smith's use of Revelation 1:6 was not used by Smith to teach that God the Father had a father, but that that "when the Father condescended from a fullness of his divine state to become mortal, he was born into a world and had a father *as a mortal*" (Ostler 2006, 444).

Ostler (2008, 17) admits that "until recently almost all Mormons believed that Joseph Smith taught that God progressed to become fully divine from a lower state of non-divinity." Though Smith's use of John 5:19 is traditionally interpreted by LDS theologians to imply that Jesus followed the Father's example of progressing to exaltation, Ostler instead takes the passage to imply only that Jesus, like the Father, was fully divine prior to mortality (Ostler 2006, 438).

This does not appear to be the best interpretation of Smith's words in the King Follett discourse. Smith is claiming that there is something Jesus has in common with the Father, not something the Father has in common with the Son. He is pointing out specifically that just as the Father had the power to lay down his body and take it up again, so the Son has the power to lay down his body and take it up again. This comparison says nothing of the ontological status of the person who precedes the mortal life.

Even if Ostler's interpretation of this passage from the King Follett discourse based on John 5:19 is correct, it would disprove his main point. While it may have been taught by Joseph Smith that Christ was a fully divine person prior to mortality, it is also taught that there was a time when Jesus was exalted. That is, Jesus was the firstborn spirit child of God in the

pre-existence and progressed to divinity. Speaking of Jesus Christ, LDS apostle Bruce McConkie (1966, 129) reminds us that "by obedience and devotion to the truth he attained that pinnacle of intelligence which ranked him as a God, as the Lord Omnipotent, while yet in his pre-existent state." In "Lecture Fifth" of the Lectures on Faith, Joseph Smith teaches that Jesus, having overcome, "received a fullness of the glory of the Father" (Smith 1985, 60). Later, in "Lecture Seventh" in the Lectures on Faith, Smith points out that in his theology, Jesus Christ is the prototype of a saved and glorified person. He is the example for us to follow, a person who, through faith, "has become perfect enough to lay hold upon eternal life" (1985, 75). There was a time, call it time T, when Jesus was not fully divine. Then at T1 he was exalted, then at T2 he was mortal, and then at T3 he was full of glory once more. If Ostler is correct in his interpretation of Smith's use of John 5:19, and Jesus follows the Father's example, that would imply that God the Father was once a mere organized being, who was later exalted due to his faith and obedience, after which he became mortal and then, finally, was glorified. Thus, if Ostler is correct, God the Father still has not been God from all eternity.

The great lesson Smith is stressing is that humans may follow in the example of an eternal chain of exalted beings. God the Father followed his father's example to divinity, Jesus followed God the Father's example, and humans may follow Jesus' example. Humans today simply follow the pattern of the gods before us, as they have done before them, etc., etc., *ad infinitum*. Beckwith's critique stands, and the moral argument for God's existence stands as a solid argument against LDS theism.

Ostler also argues that a passage from the King Follett discourse that is often seen as proof of Joseph Smith's vision of a plurality of Gods is actually better situated in his interpretive frame in which God was eternally

fully divine prior to his mortal sojourn. In the official LDS version of the King Follett discourse, Joseph Smith states:

> … it is necessary we should understand the character and being of God and how He came to be so; for I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see. (Smith 1980, 6:305; see also Ostler 2006, 441)

In this passage Smith apparently refutes the idea that God the Father "has always been God or always had divine status" (Ostler 2006, 441).

Ostler's strategy with this text is to argue for a revision of the text that will allow for a different interpretation. Ostler argues that the above statement, while supported by Willard Richards and Wilford Woodruff's recollection of the sermon, is not in harmony with Thomas Bullock's report of the discourse (Ostler 2006, 441). Ostler also points out that William Clayton omits the statement "about a refutation altogether." However, one should accept the text as the LDS church publishes it for four reasons.

First, for some inexplicable reason, Ostler neglects to convey that William Clayton's report, while not recording the exact phrase as the others, does tell us that Smith claimed to "tell you how God came to be God." While he does not reproduce the exact same phrase as Willard Richards and Wilford Woodruff, he does produce the same doctrine.

Secondly, Ostler fails to mention other reports of the sermon. Samuel W. Richards's record is brief, but remarkably records the sentence in question. It states, "to have eternal life, God: a man like one of us, even like Adam. Not God from all eternity" (Ehat and Cook 1980, 361).

Thirdly, Bullock's account is not as out of harmony with Richard's and Woodruff's account as Ostler would like us to believe. Bullock's report records, "I am going to tell you what sort of a being of God. for he was God

from the begin of all eternity and if I do not refute it" (Ehat and Cook 1980, 350).[3] Ostler claims Bullock's report states that Smith does not intend to refute the idea that God has been God from all eternity. However, at best, Bullock's report is ambiguous, as Smith is reported in that account to have said only, "if I do not refute it." He does not say "I do not refute it." Rather, it could easily be understood as shorthand for something like, "see if I do not refute it." In fact, Bullock notes that just after this statement, Smith went on to argue that "God himself the father of us all dwelt on a Earth same as Js. himself did" (p. 350). This seems to refute the idea that God has been God from all eternity in that there is at least that time God dwelt on an earth, and during that time God was not fully exalted.

Bullock's notes go on to argue from this point that humans have this capacity to dwell on an Earth and be exalted to divine status as well, claiming "you have got to learn how to be a God yourself & be K. & Priest to God same as all have done by going from a small capy to anr. from grace to grace until the resn. & sit in everlasting power as they who have gone before & God" (Ehat and Cook 1980, 350).[4]  The theology Bullock records is entirely in line with that which was reported by Richards, Woodruff, and Clayton. Ostler's interpretation of Bullock's report is out of line with not only other reports of the same sermon from others who were there, but with Bullock's own report.

As further evidence for Bullock's substantial harmony with the official LDS report, it is worth noting that Bullock was responsible

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3   In this section the reader may note many formatting, spelling, and grammar errors in the journal and diary entries supplied from LDS members of the past. I have attempted to reproduce the text of the journal or diary entry as it appears in Ehat and Cook's *The words of Joseph Smith* (1980), and will not be marking each error.

4   Ibid.

for preparing the minutes of the conference based on his and William Clayton's notes (Barney 1997, 107). These minutes were then published by the LDS church in *Times and Seasons*. It seems odd that Ostler relies on Bullock's report, but not the official minutes he produced. Bullock's minutes bear witness that Smith claimed, "We have imagined that God was God from all eternity," but that it is necessary to "understand the character and being of God, for I am going to tell you how God came to be God." The preponderance of the reporting seems to point in one direction, namely, the traditional interpretation. It is also telling that Stan Larson's newly amalgamated text of the King Follett discourse is in harmony with the traditional LDS published version of the discourse. It reads, "For we have imagined that God was God from the beginning of all eternity. I will refute that idea and take away the veil so you may see" (Larson 1978, 201; cf. Roberts 1903, 227).

In his second major argument for a kingship monotheism interpretation of LDS theology, Ostler argues against the traditional LDS interpretation of Smith's use of Revelation 1:6 in his Sermon in the Grove, in which Smith proclaimed, "that the Father had a father and that there is another 'Father above the Father of Christ'" (Ostler 2006, 444). Rather than understanding Smith to be preaching that God the Father is descended from other gods before him, Ostler would rather have us understand Smith's teaching to imply only that "when the Father condescended from a fullness of his divine state to become mortal, he was born into a world and had a father as a mortal" (Ostler 2006, 444). Ostler begins his defense of this interpretation by noting that Smith continues to stress that Jesus does "precisely" what the Father did before him (p. 445). As we saw above, this strategy fails to suit Ostler's purposes because if the analogy holds, it proves too much. If Jesus follows the Father's example, then the pattern is

that of a person birthed by divine parents, who achieved exaltation through obedience to eternal laws, entered into mortality, and exercised power to take his life up again after death. Yet this is exactly the traditional LDS interpretation that Ostler seeks to overturn.

As an additional consideration to move people to his view on this passage, Ostler points out that George Laub's journal notes from this sermon state that "the holy ghost is yet a spiritual body and waiting to take upon himself a body, as the Savior did or as god did." Ostler concludes from this that "Joseph Smith taught that already divine persons, including the Son and the Holy Ghost, take upon themselves bodies" (Ostler 2006, 445). The major problem with this reliance on George Laub's journal is that Ostler's quotation of this portion of the journal is incomplete, and misleadingly so. Laub's sentence continues on where Ostler provides a period. The sentence proceeds as follows: "… as the Savior did or as god did *or the gods before them* …" (Ehat and Cook 1980, 382, emphasis added). Laub extends the analogy: "the Scriptures say those who obey the commandments shall be heirs of God and joint heirs with of Jesus Christ we then also took bodys to lay them down, to take them up again" (p. 382). Laub's understanding of Joseph Smith's teaching is that humans do just what Jesus did, which is just what the Father did before him, and what other gods did before him. The Father, the Son, and we humans are but three links in an eternal chain of gods. Contra Ostler's contention, Laub's journal provides deeper evidence that Smith's thinking about God is much more akin to the traditional LDS interpretation than Ostler's.

Thus, after examining Ostler's attempt to reinterpret Smith's mature teaching on God's nature, it looks as though the traditional LDS interpretation of Smith's teaching is correct, in which case Beckwith's argument holds. While providing evidence for the God of traditional

Christian theism, the moral argument for God's existence does not offer such evidence for the LDS theologian since God is subject to eternal laws that exist independent of God, and to which God is subject. Further, if sound, the moral argument, by pointing to a divine being who is the grounding for objective moral values and duties, serves as a defeater for any worldview that does not contain such a being. Mormon theology, having no such being to serve as the grounding for objective moral values and duties, has a considerable philosophical challenge.

It is worth noting that even if Ostler is right in his interpretation of Joseph Smith's mature teaching on God's nature, his kingship monotheistic theology does nothing to rescue Mormonism from the moral argument for God's existence. This is because Ostler still envisions moral goodness as existing independent of God. On Ostler's kingship monotheism, even if God has existed from eternity past as the head God, moral laws are co-eternal and exist independent of God.

Ostler contends for a view of moral obligations grounded in "the eternal nature of uncreated realities and our inherent capacities for progression and growth to realize our divine nature" (Ostler 2006, 110). His "agape theory" of ethics holds that "moral laws define the conditions that are necessary for the growth and progress of intelligences to partake of the divine nature" (p. 110). His view is that we act such that "each shall have the best life possible within the constraints posed by eternal conditions necessary for mutual self-realization" (p. 110). In his view, humans have divine potential, so the good is just "whatever leads to our realization of our humanity in a fullness of divinity" (p. 110). God's nature is divine, and so, in some sense, the good is "defined by the nature of God", but not necessarily so, as Ostler holds that it is possible for God to do something evil (p. 87). For Ostler, the good is "whatever leads to greater love and unity in interpersonal

relationships" (p. 111). This is objective, Ostler maintains, because it has an inescapable force, and it is the same for every person. What is clear is that its inescapable force and universality are not dependent on God ontologically. Ostler argues, "Love is not a law instituted by God, although it is a law expressive of who and what God is" (p. 114). Further, "there are eternal moral principles which condition even God, and these principles are found in the constraints inherent within intelligences for mutual self-realization as divine persons" (p. 114).

Ostler's "agape theory" points to an eternal law, the "law of love" that sits in judgment over the head God, Gods, and Gods in embryo. He posits an objective law that exists and to which humans and God himself must submit to realize their divine potential. There are several pitfalls associated with this position.

First, should God fail to abide by the law of love, he would cease to be fully divine. Being fully divine would seem to be a prerequisite for being the head God, and therefore it seems that on Ostler's view, there are possible worlds where the head God is not the head God.

Second, Ostler is still holding onto a view of objective morality that falls prey to the Euthyphro dilemma in the same way the traditional LDS view does. Morality is not ultimately grounded in God's nature, but God commands what is good after aligning his will to the good. God's commands may be good, but only in virtue of his learning the eternal law and commanding that which is in line with that law. Thus, the moral argument for God's existence does not offer proof for Ostler's kingship monotheistic God any more than it provides proof for the traditional LDS view of Gods, or the ancient polytheistic gods of the Greeks and Romans.

Third, Ostler's agape ethic bears a family resemblance to the atheistic ethics of Sam Harris discussed previously. Harris believed the

grounding for human ethics relates to objective facts about human thriving. In a like manner, Ostler's view does not escape the prudential orbit. He gives no grounding for the command, "thou shalt realize your potential." There may be facts about what will aid one's quest to greatness, but that does not make one's actions moral just because they are done in pursuit of that potential. Nor does Ostler offer a moral reason why one should be concerned with reaching one's potential rather than helping carrots reach their potential. Like Sam Harris, Ostler is left with an "is" but no "ought." He may describe the human condition, but he has no grounding to prescribe human action. Morality becomes a means to an end, but not normative. Harris and Ostler both tell us what they believe will aid human flourishing, but Harris's natural order cannot find a moral grounding that obligates us to pursue that flourishing, and neither can Ostler's God.

Lastly, Ostler's eternal agape ethic appears arbitrary. Ostler claims that the good is bound up with what is loving. But what if what makes us realize our potential was harming others? Would we not then be obligated in Ostler's view to do harm? There appears to be no reason to think that love would be the objective moral good on Ostler's view. He seems to tacitly understand this problem and posits "that the moral law arises only in the context of interpersonal relations" (Ostler 2006, 84). Ostler seems to see that only if the fundamental grounding of morality is tied in some way to a loving interpersonal relationship could love be tied non-arbitrarily to objective morality. Yet Ostler does not propose a loving relationship as the grounding of objective values and duties. Instead, it is one's potential that grounds what one should do, and this potential is led forward by loving action. Thus, at the heart of Ostler's agape ethic, there is no interpersonal relationship; there is a law, and there seems to be nothing to constrain this

law from taking a more nefarious form in which it obligates humans to harm others to reach one's potential.

The distinctively Christian teaching on divinity is that God has eternally existed as the triune God. God has eternally existed in three persons "who have always existed in a relationship of perfect love with one another" (Baggett 2013, 347). Non-trinitarian worldviews like Mormon theism of any variety do not suppose an eternal God who has always existed in loving interpersonal relations. By their nature, non-trinitarian theistic expressions are at a distinct disadvantage in explaining how the nature of morality could be essentially one of love (Baggett 2013, 347).

## 5. Conclusion

The metaphysical commitments of traditional Christian theism are compatible with the entailments of the moral argument for God's existence. The same cannot be said for LDS theism in either its traditional form or in the kingship monotheistic variety proposed by Blake Ostler. The moral argument for the existence of God, then, not only fails to support LDS theism, but it also serves as a defeater for that theistic expression. The God of LDS theology is not the full and final grounding for objective moral values and duties as the God of the moral argument is.

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