

Evil, Mormonism, and the Impossibility of Perfection *Ab Initio*: An Irenaeian Defense¹

Carl Mosser

Carl Mosser is Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies at Eastern University in St. Davids, Pennsylvania. He also serves as an Adjunct Professor in the graduate program in Christian Apologetics at Biola University in La Mirada, California. He is the author of several articles on topics as diverse as the epistle to the Hebrews, Calvin's theology, and the origin of the patristic doctrine of deification. Dr. Mosser is co-editor (with Francis Beckwith and Paul Owen) of *The New Mormon Challenge* (Zondervan, 2002).

Introduction

A strategy favored by apologists for all forms of finite theism is to adapt arguments from evil against classic theism while simultaneously denying the atheistic conclusion that no deities exist. This allows the finite theist to make room for a view of God (or the gods) that is allegedly superior to classic theism since it easily evades atheistic arguments. This strategy was employed as early as the second century when Valentinian Gnostics used an argument from evil against proto-orthodox Christianity.

The Valentinian argument focused on the fact of human imperfection and the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Their basic claim was that the Christian God could have created human beings perfect from the beginning and incapable of going wrong. The fact that human beings are imperfect demonstrates that they were not created by the Christian God. They reasoned that the Christian God, unlike the Demiurge and deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon, is not limited by preexisting, uncreated matter in his work of creation. He can create anything he wants *ex nihilo*. Since the Christian God is supposed to be all-good, they presumed that he would have created a perfect human race that could not err. The reality of human imperfection (particularly moral imperfection) demonstrates that humanity was not created by a being who is both all good

and has the ability to create *ex nihilo*; the God of Christianity is not the creator of the world.²

This "Gnostic" argument has been revived by philosophers who wish to disprove Christian orthodoxy in favor of their preferred form of finite theism. The most well-known contemporary version of the argument comes from process theist David Ray Griffin.³ But LDS thinkers have produced distinctively Mormon solutions to the problem of evil that include versions of this argument.⁴ Mormons claim that their worldview has the resources to solve the problem of evil whereas orthodox Christianity cannot. They see this as one of the strongest philosophical arguments in favor of Mormon theism. A detailed critique of LDS theodicies is impossible within the confines of this essay. Instead we will focus on the LDS version of the "Gnostic" argument from evil and offer an Irenaeian defense in reply.⁵ It is worth focusing on this particular argument because Latter-day Saints have recently deployed it specifically against evangelical Protestant theology.⁶ My contention is that Irenaeus's reply to the ancient version of the argument was successful and has sufficient resources to serve as an adequate defense against the contemporary Mormon version as well. It may also illuminate some of God's intentions in the creation of humanity and his allowance or predetermination of the fall (it works with

both Arminian and Calvinist views).

***Creatio ex Nihilo* and the Problem of Humanity's Moral Imperfection**

In formulating and replying to the argument from evil, atheists and theists both focus on whether the existence of evil is compatible with God's goodness and omnipotence. The notion of omnipotence is usually specified only in terms of logical limitations. But as David Griffin points out, the typical problem of evil is "uniquely a problem for those theistic positions that hold the doctrine of omnipotence implied by the doctrine of creation out of nothing."⁷ The significance of this further specification is not always appreciated. Mormon philosophers David Paulsen and Blake Ostler observe that "apologists for belief in God have labored long to reconcile the world's evil with God's goodness and power" but "have often overlooked the much more difficult task of reconciling evil . . . with his absolute creation and absolute foreknowledge as well."⁸ God's absolute creation of the world and foreknowledge are presupposed when atheists and theists speak of God's omnipotence and omniscience. But Paulsen and Ostler contend that as long as these doctrines remain presuppositions the problem of evil has not been stated in its starkest terms.

Following Antony Flew, Paulsen and Ostler argue that "if God creates all things (including finite agents) absolutely (that is, out of nothing), knowing beforehand all the actual future consequences of his creative choices, then he is an accessory before the fact and ultimately responsible for every moral and nonmoral defect in the universe."⁹ The reason that God is responsible for every evil is that he *knowingly* "chose to bring them all into

existence when he created the world *ex nihilo*." It was within his power to refrain from creating and, they claim, it was within his power to create a better world than this one. Paulsen and Ostler are well-acquainted with Plantinga's famous freewill defense which argues that it is possible God could not have created a better world than this one.¹⁰ They find it unconvincing and maintain that in the least God could have "created a world with persons who are morally more sensitive than we are, or brighter and better able to prevent abuses and natural disasters."¹¹ Since these qualities would not reduce free will, it is inconceivable to think that a good God who has the power to create *ex nihilo* would have chosen to create inferior beings prone to evil such as we are. Thus, they believe that "the fact that our world is permeated with evil *logically* precludes its being God's creation."¹²

In a separate article David Paulsen has addressed two possible rejoinders to the claim that God could have created human beings to be more morally sensitive and virtuous than they are. He ascribes to John Hick the position that moral virtue attained by meeting and mastering temptations by a proper use of free will is good in a richer sense than virtue created *ab initio* ("in the beginning").¹³ On this view God could have created us with more virtue, but it would be inferior to the virtue we develop in a soul-making environment. Paulsen ascribes to Tennant the stronger position that moral goodness is impossible unless it is acquired through a self-directed developmental process; it simply cannot be created *ab initio*. The basic assumption that Hick and Tennant attempt to disprove is the idea that God could create free creatures who are so morally advanced *ab initio* that they

would never go wrong. Paulsen believes that both arguments fail because they are inconsistent with the view that God is eternally and immutably good, something both Hick and Tennant believe to be true of God.

If Hick is right about moral virtue and about divine goodness, then God's moral virtue is less rich and less valuable than human virtue. But it seems absurd to say that God's moral virtue is in anyway inferior to our own. If Tennant is right, then "God cannot be morally good because His character is *not* the outcome of a self-directed developmental process."¹⁴ If we affirm both God's determinate goodness and his power to create *ex nihilo*, then according to Paulsen we cannot evade the fact that God could have created human beings who are morally more advanced than we are. If, however, he could do this but chose not to, then his goodness is in question because there can be no instrumental reason for creating human beings morally less advanced than they could have been. Classic theism is thus disproved and we are left with three choices. We can (1) deny that God exists, but the argument does not demand so much; (2) we can maintain that God exists and created the world *ex nihilo* but deny that he is morally good; or (3) we can modify our conception of God to something like Paulsen's Mormon view that does not ascribe to God the power to create *ex nihilo* and which sees God as having developed his virtue through a process just as we do.¹⁵

In a short reply to Paulsen, David and Randall Basinger argue that his line of reasoning does not successfully undermine the free will defense since some versions do not appeal to developmental notions of moral virtue, most notably

Plantinga's.¹⁶ Plantinga's free will defense simply appeals to the impossibility of God creating significantly free creatures who are guaranteed to always freely choose the good. In a recent essay Blake Ostler addresses this point by appealing to the fact that a God who creates *ex nihilo* "can create any persons that it is logically possible to create."¹⁷ It is logically possible that free creatures could always choose the right. Thus, God could have created a world inhabited only by free creatures that in fact do so. One of the chief reasons that we do not always choose the right is our limited rationality. But God could have created us to be "perfectly rational persons who would always see by the light of reason that choosing what is right is the most rational course."¹⁸ In the least, "God had open to him the possibility of creating more intelligent and morally sensitive creatures who would bring about less evil than we do through our sheer irrationality. God is thus morally indictable for having created creatures who bring about more evil than other creatures he could have created from nothing."¹⁹

Ostler summarizes these assertions when he claims that it makes no sense to employ soul-making strategies like Hick's in the context of creedal Christianity since God "can simply create any persons he wants out of nothing. The God of the creeds could have created a world that is free of any evil whatsoever. He could have created persons who were already morally superior in a world without any natural evil. He could have created already morally advanced creatures who did not require the extreme conditions we encounter in this life as a basis for growth."²⁰

The Mormon Alternative

Latter-day Saints like Paulsen and Ostler are confident that evil presents an insurmountable problem to all versions of orthodox Christian thought. But they are confident that the Mormon worldview has the resources to “dissolve” the problem of evil.²¹ If the traditional problem of evil is uniquely a problem for those theologies that affirm that God creates *ex nihilo*, then they are right.²² In significant respects the Mormon view of creation is like that of the ancient Greeks. The cosmos, or at least that part of it in which we find ourselves, was formed out of uncreated, chaotic matter (Doctrine and Covenants [D&C] 93:33; Book of Abraham 3:24; 4:1).²³ On this view matter self-exists and its most basic properties and potentialities are brute facts. The range of ways in which matter might be structured, shaped, and combined is limited by its uncreated nature. It is not infinitely plastic, and even God is limited in what he can create using the materials that happen to be available to him.²⁴ Additionally, in the Mormon worldview, God must act in accord with uncreated eternal principles that govern the universe at its most basic level.²⁵ Moreover, humans are like God, uncreated in their most primal selves (D&C 93:29; cf. 93:23; Book of Abraham 3:18).²⁶

The Book of Mormon describes God as omnipotent (Mosiah 3:5, 17-18, 21; 5:2, 15), and in the Doctrine and Covenants he is referred to as “him who has all power” (D&C 61:1). But in the context of the traditional Mormon worldview, such statements must either be taken as hyperbole or the concept of omnipotence is different than what people have traditionally understood. God did not create the matter with which the cosmos is composed, the various eternal laws that govern it at

the most fundamental level, or human beings in their most basic constitution. All of these things, like God, are part of ultimate reality, self-existent and eternal. God had nothing to do with bringing any of them into being; he is powerless to bring any to an end. Neither does he have the power to change their fundamental natures because they exist independent of his creative power. These things limit his power. As McMurrin explains, “For Mormonism the universe is a ‘pluriverse’ of both personal and impersonal elements, and these all have ultimate reality and they genuinely condition one another.”²⁷ While God is very powerful, *omnipotence* in the Mormon worldview “means God has all the power it is possible to have in a universe—actually a pluriverse—of these givens.”²⁸ Just how much this metaphysical pluralism limits God’s power is debated, but it is clear that the Mormon view of God, like that of the ancient Greeks, implies a version of finite theism.²⁹

Mormonism’s finite theism plays a role at several points in Mormon theodocies. But at the heart of them all is the idea that God is not responsible for what he did not create, and this includes the most primal part of each human being. The Mormon can employ the ancient “Gnostic” argument from evil not just because Mormonism denies *creatio ex nihilo*, but because it affirms that “man was also in the beginning with God” (D&C 93:29). This is a more radical notion than the idea that God created everything out of preexisting matter, including human beings. The LDS Standard Works and the statements of Joseph Smith are sometimes ambiguous and inconsistent in their descriptions of the premortal stages that human beings went through and what role is played in

our development by the fact that God is supposed to have begotten us as “spirit children.” Nonetheless, Doctrine and Covenants 93:29 seems to commit Mormonism to the idea that humans have eternally self-existed as *human beings* in one form or other.³⁰ This explains why the “Gnostic” argument from evil naturally suggests itself to Mormons who are concerned to show that their view of God and evil is superior to that of orthodox Christianity. God cannot be held responsible for the fundamental imperfections in any human person. If evil is a product of human imperfection, or if human imperfection is considered an evil, then evil is eternal because human beings are eternal. B. H. Roberts, a Mormon General Authority from the early twentieth century, made these points eloquently in the following summary of his influential theodicy.

[Evil] is as eternal as good; as eternal as space or duration or matter or force. God did not create any of these things, nor is He responsible for them. He found Himself, so to speak, co-eternal with these and other eternal things, and so works out His creative designs in harmony with those existences; not creating intelligences, but begetting intelligences, spirits. God is not responsible for the inner fact of them—the entity which ultimately determines the intellectual and moral character of spirits and of men, which are but spirits incarnate in human bodies. God is not responsible for their nature, as if He had created them absolutely out of nothing—intelligences, spirits, men; and created them as He would have them, measuring to each severally as He pleased to have them in intellectual degree and intensity of moral value. Had He so absolutely created them, He could have made the man of lowly degree the same as the man of highest degree; the man of brute mind and nature the same as the man of refined sentiment and aesthetic instincts. Why this inequality, if God absolutely created

men—intelligence, spirit, body; and created them as he willed to have them, and could have had them different had He so willed? Why then did He not have them of higher grade all round? Why were not all the men made brave and all the women fair? The answer to all this is that God did all that could be done as the immanent, eternally active, and creating, and causing power in the universe under the limitations of other eternal existences... including consideration of the intractableness of the material with which the Creator had to work.³¹

Initial Analysis of the Mormon Version of the “Gnostic” Argument from Evil

It is beyond the scope of this essay to respond to all the claims that Mormon philosophers have made with respect to orthodox Christianity and the problem of evil. Our focus is specifically on the claims made about *creatio ex nihilo* and human imperfection, i.e., the Mormon version of the ‘Gnostic’ argument from evil. We can formulate this argument in a simple set of propositions:

- P1 A perfectly good God would want to create morally advanced beings who always choose the right.
- P2 A God who has the power to create *ex nihilo* can create any persons he wants *ex nihilo*.
- P3 From P2 it follows that the God of Christian orthodoxy could create persons who are morally advanced *ab initio*.
- P4 Human beings do not always choose the right because they are not as intelligent and morally sensitive as they could be.
- P5 Therefore, on the basis of P1-P4 we can conclude that human beings were not created by a good God who has the power to create *ex nihilo*.

P1 makes an *a priori* inference from God’s goodness to what he *would* want

to do. This makes the mistake of trying to determine what God would or would not do (provided he has the power) based on a single abstracted divine attribute as if it is the only relevant factor. This is not a very reliable way of determining what God would or would not do. For example, based simply on an *a priori* analysis of God's goodness we would expect that he would not allow his Son to suffer and die if he had the power to prevent it. After all, who of us would allow our own son or daughter to suffer and die if it was within our power to prevent it? But Mormons and evangelicals agree that this is exactly what God did, and we do not believe that it calls his goodness into question. One might reply that allowing Jesus to suffer and die was necessary for the atonement and that is why God did what we would not expect him to do based solely on considerations of his goodness. But why could God not simply pronounce forgiveness without Jesus' bloody suffering and death? There might be reasons why he could not or why it was preferable for him not to do this, but they will not be revealed by a simplistic analysis of what God would do based on his goodness. One cannot derive *would* from *good*.

In the analogous situation, one could grant that it is within God's power to create morally advanced creatures who never go wrong (P4), but it would not follow necessarily from God's goodness that he would in fact do this. It is possible that a good God might have reasons for creating human beings who are not morally advanced and incapable of wrongdoing. Neither Mormon philosophers nor anyone else is in an epistemic position to know that there are *no* such reasons that could justify God acting contrary to the expectations that are generated by our analyses of

his goodness—as if the living God would ever need to justify actions that run contrary to *our* expectations! Even if we had no idea what sorts of reasons these might be, the fact that we cannot know for certain that no such reasons exist is sufficient to render the argument unsound. But it would remain open for the proponent of the “Gnostic” argument to reformulate it into a probabilistic argument rather than a logical argument from evil. Whether we are in an epistemic position accurately to weigh probabilities in this matter is also questionable. But let us grant for the sake of argument that we could determine that it is more improbable than not that there are no justifying reasons if we cannot identify at least one plausible candidate. The question then becomes—Are there any plausible reasons that God might have for creating human beings who are less morally advanced than they could be and prone to misusing their will?

One of the key claims of all versions of the free will defense is that libertarian free will is a plausible candidate for why God created beings who could go wrong. But Ostler contends that a God who creates *ex nihilo* can create anything that can logically possibly exist, including a race of creatures with libertarian free will who happen to never misuse it. Advocates of the free will defense would dispute this and contend that it is possible that there is no possible world in which God creates free creatures who never do evil. But one need not appeal to libertarian free will to believe that God may have sufficient reason for not doing what a simplistic analysis of his goodness like Ostler's might lead us to expect. Even if we assume that God did want to create morally advanced creatures who always choose the right *and* that he has the power

to do so, it would not follow, contrary to Ostler's assumptions, that he would create them as such *ab initio*. But as things stand it is *not* clear that a God who creates *ex nihilo* has this power to create beings who are morally advanced *ab initio*. To use Ostler's terminology, it is not really a matter of *power* but of "logical possibility" or, more accurately, of metaphysical possibility. It is here that Irenaeus proves helpful.

Irenaeus' Reply to the Ancient Gnostic Argument³²

In Book 4 of his *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus replies to the original Valentinian version of the "Gnostic" argument from evil. The basic objection to which Irenaeus replies stems from the assumption that anything created by a God who can create *ex nihilo* (whether that thing was created *ex nihilo* or not) can be precisely what God intends for it to be *ab initio*. Irenaeus's opponents argued against the Christian concept of God from the assumption that such a God could have created humanity free from the reality or possibility of corruption and evil. But humanity is fallible, corrupt, and prone to evil. For the Valentinian Gnostic this is proof either that humanity was not created by a God like Irenaeus's, or it is proof that the God who created humanity cannot be wholly good since he would be culpable for creating a defective humanity when he had the power to create a perfect one.

Irenaeus readily identifies the philosophical error in these assumptions and maintains the traditional story of creation-fall-redemption-perfection. The philosophical error is rather easy to expose. Even a God who creates *ex nihilo* cannot create anything that requires specific kinds of experience or process to have occurred in order for it to be that specific

kind of thing. For example, God could not create an elderly man *ab initio*. Clearly, the existence of elderly men is metaphysically possible, but that does not mean that an elderly man can be created *ex nihilo*. God could create a man with grey hair, frail bones and even apparent memories, but this would not truly be an elderly man. Nor could God create a woman who *ab initio* knows what it is like to raise three children. At best God could create creatures that mimic the realities. Irenaeus seems to have understood the modern point that the way in which something comes to be known is, in at least some instances, a necessary component of the knowledge. The knowledge of such creatures would not simply be fictive, it would not be the same knowledge.³³ Likewise, he seems to have understood that past experience can be necessary in order for a thing to be the thing that it is.

Irenaeus's reply points to more relevant examples. God cannot create human beings who *ab initio* have a knowledge of good and evil of such a kind that they will, in the likeness of God, always love good and hate evil. It is simply not possible for recently created beings to be anything other than "unaccustomed to, and unexercised in, perfect discipline."³⁴ While God can possess this property eternally by virtue of his divine being, contingent creatures must come to this knowledge by experience. According to Irenaeus, this knowledge can be attained in two ways. The first is by a sustained obedience to God's commandment in the face of a real choice. By continually choosing to obey over an extended period of time, the creature will grow in likeness of God until it eventually develops an immutable moral goodness. The other way is by redemption from disobedience and the experience

of evil. Those who taste the bitterness of disobedience and separation from God will be in a position, when presented with restoration and reformation, to choose the path of life and obedience. Retaining their knowledge of the goodness of Good and the wickedness of Evil, those who so respond to God's gift of life will be transformed completely into his moral likeness when confronted with the beatific vision.³⁵ Even more, they will be able to hear God (contrast Exod 20:19) and as a result they will be made astonishingly glorious.³⁶

Irenaeus acknowledges that there is a sense in which God could have conferred immortality and incorruptibility on humanity from the beginning—just as a mother has the power to give her newborn infant solid food. However, because these are properties that properly belong only to the uncreated God and no contingent being, the recently created human race would not have been able to maintain them. Humanity needed to be prepared for receiving them. If they had been bestowed *ab initio* this would have been to the detriment of the human race in much the same way that giving a newborn solid food is harmful rather than healthful.³⁷ To insist that created humanity could have been made immortal and incorruptible without the preparation of real growth would, in Irenaeus' view, be to say that "there is no distinction between the uncreated God and man, a creature of today."³⁸ His objectors, Irenaeus claims, have simply failed to understand God and themselves and the necessity of humanity first being created susceptible to passions, to grow through experience and then later be perfected.³⁹ They are therefore irrational for casting blame on God for humanity's current weakness.⁴⁰

The Ancient Reply and the Modern Argument

It should be clear that Irenaeus's Valentinian opponents and Mormon finite theists are employing the same basic argument from evil. The key premise is that a God who creates *ex nihilo* can create anything he wants, including rational free creatures who are morally perfect and incorruptible from the moment of their creation. Irenaeus grants that God could and did create morally innocent human beings. Even though God has the power to create *ex nihilo*, it does not follow that he could have created humanity with an already developed moral fortitude that would guarantee that they always choose the right. *This could be created only through experience.* Humanity could repeatedly exercise the will to choose the right in obedience to God's commandment and thereby develop an immutably good moral character. This is the inverse of what happens when people repeatedly give themselves over to certain vices until they are no longer free with respect to those vices (e.g., alcoholism, drugs, gambling). Alternatively, this could be created by a redemptive transformation of creatures who gain an experiential knowledge of good and evil in a fallen state. There may even be a qualitative difference between these two means with the contrasted knowledge of the latter contributing something to the creature's character that could not be developed by habitual obedience.

Paulsen and Ostler acknowledge that there is at least one kind of being that even a God who creates *ex nihilo* cannot create. Their example is that "not even God can create an uncreated being."⁴¹ Behind this example lies the simple metaphysical point that by definition a creature cannot

be uncreated. Irenaeus's argument relies on the same point. For Irenaeus immortality and incorruptibility are properly properties of the uncreated God that can be shared only with contingent creatures who have matured through certain kinds of experience.⁴² Created beings cannot possess these properties *ab initio* anymore than a newborn baby can digest a sirloin steak.

Since God foreknew the fall, the Irenaean reply to the "Gnostic" argument from evil can be extended. Though it is not a necessary implication from his goodness, it appears that God does want to create morally advanced beings who always choose the right. Redemption is his means of actualizing this. God created a world he knew would fall as part of a plan to create beings who would eventually reflect his image and likeness to the greatest degree possible for created beings. Redeeming fallen creatures allows God to create persons who more fully reflect his image and likeness than could be created if humanity had simply matured in a state of obedient innocence. God, being necessarily good, is naturally repulsed by evil. But *contingent* creatures cannot be created *necessarily* good, only contingently good. If God's intention is to create a race of beings who are repulsed by evil in a way analogous to his own repulsion, it seems that the only way to bring this about is for them to experience evil and learn to hate it. But God wants the fellowship of morally perfect creatures who love only the good. The only way for these intentions to be fulfilled was to create *redeemed creatures*. These are beings who have experienced the evil of evil and learned to hate it but who have been transformed into the likeness of God's immortality and incorruptibility and now

love only the good. By definition creatures cannot be created who are redeemed *ab initio*. Necessarily at some point they must exist in a state requiring redemption and then be redeemed. There is simply no other way to create redeemed creatures, even by an omnipotent God who can create *ex nihilo*. Thus, a God who creates *ex nihilo* cannot create any sort of being he wants *ab initio*. The crucial premise shared by the ancient "Gnostic" argument from evil and its Mormon reincarnation is false and the argument fails.

Conclusion

God did not create us as uncreated beings. Does this generate a problem of evil for the existence of God? No. By definition the uncreated cannot be created, thus it would be absurd to think that God could have created us as uncreated beings. According to Irenaeus it is just as absurd to morally indict the God who creates *ex nihilo* for not creating us perfect from the beginning. In the beginning God was able to create the human race innocent and free from moral imperfection and that is what he did. But it was not possible for him to create an already morally mature race because maturity entails growth. Likewise, it was also impossible for God to create a race of beings who were already redeemed. There is reason to believe that redeemed creatures can come to have greater conformity to God than creatures that never require redemption. The reason is that they learn to hate evil and love the good in a way that morally innocent creatures cannot. This acquired knowledge of good and evil approximates God's natural knowledge of good and evil more closely than moral innocence and an instinctive aversion to evil would. It also brings them experiential knowledge of the

goodness of God's justice and, especially, his mercy. By uniting the sinner to himself in Christ knowledge of *the Good* is conveyed. If God's intention were to create a race of beings that were as much like him as it is possible for created beings to be, then the creation of redeemed creatures is a way to accomplish this. It may even be the only way to accomplish this. As long as this is a possibility the "Gnostic" argument from evil that Mormon philosophers use against the existence of the God of orthodox Christianity fails. Irenaeus's defense against the Valentinian version of the argument continues to prove its worth. One of the nice upshots of this Irenaeian defense is that it is truly ecumenical. All orthodox Christians can employ it, including Arminians and Calvinists, because it does not depend upon particular conceptions of free will. All it depends upon is the simple fact that it is impossible for God to create redeemed, perfected persons *ab initio*.

As long as we have reason to believe that God is in the process of creating redeemed creatures, we have warrant for believing that his creation of the world is not yet complete. In the end the world may yet conform to his intentions and there will be no evil. Though the process is far from complete, I, for one, can testify to already knowing the goodness of his mercy in redemption and growing conformity into his image. If a sinner like me can know this, there is hope for the rest of the world.

ENDNOTES

¹Portions of this article were presented at the annual Scottish Universities Postgraduate Study Day at the University of Glasgow, 2 June 2004. My thanks to those who attended that paper and offered

their feedback.

²Those versed in the current debate about biological evolution and Intelligent Design will recognize this to be a close cousin to Darwinian arguments from evil. See further Cornelius G. Hunter, *Darwin's God: Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001).

³For a concise version of the argument, see David R. Griffin, "Creation out of Chaos and the Problem of Evil," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 101-119. For his most recent detailed treatment of the issue, see *Evil Revisited: Responses and Reconsiderations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

⁴The primary LDS discussions of the problem of evil are Peter Appleby, "Finitist Theology and the Problem of Evil," in *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1989), 83-88; John Cobb and Truman G. Madsen, "Theodicy," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (5 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1473; Kathleen Flake, "Evil's Origins and Evil's End in the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis," *Sunstone* 21, no. 3 (1998): 24-29; Truman Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1966), 53-61; Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), 91-109; Blake T. Ostler, "The Mormon Concept of God," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 2 (1984): 80-89; David Lamont Paulsen, "Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1975), 91-154; idem, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil," *BYU Studies* 39, no. 1 (2000): 53-65; David L. Paulsen and Blake Thomas Ostler, "Sin, Suffering,

and Soul-Making: Joseph Smith on the Problem of Evil," in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Truman G. Madsen, Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), 237-84; B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. Stan Larson (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 373-83.

⁵In this context *Irenaeus* refers to the position of the second-century patristic writer Irenaeus, not to John Hick's well-known "Irenaeus" theodicy.

⁶Blake T. Ostler, "Evil: A Real Problem for Evangelicals," *FARMS Review* 15, no. 1 (2003): 201-213. Ostler's article is a reply to my brief essay "Can the Real Problem of Evil Be Solved?" in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 212-18. As his title indicates, Ostler does not primarily engage the difficulties I raise for Mormon solutions to the problem of evil. He instead attempts to turn the tables around and argue that the existence of evil is incompatible with evangelical beliefs about God and creation. His main line of argumentation is the "Gnostic" argument from evil.

⁷Griffin, "Creation out of Chaos," 104.

⁸Paulsen and Ostler, "Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making," 240.

⁹*Ibid.*, 241. This claim rests on questionable assumptions about the

transitivity of moral responsibility. However, it is beyond the scope of this essay to reply to this and some of the other disputable points that will be summarized here. Our chief concern is only with claims about what kind of persons God can create *ab initio*.

¹⁰For the most accessible version of the defense, see Alvin C. Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

¹¹Paulsen and Ostler, "Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making," 248.

¹²*Ibid.*, 247. Emphasis added. By claiming logical inconsistency Paulsen and Ostler consciously depart from the general consensus held by philosophers of religion, whether theists or atheists, that logical arguments from evil fail. It will be demonstrated shortly that Paulsen and Ostler give us no good reason to question this consensus.

¹³David Paulsen, "Divine Determinateness and the Free Will Defence [sic]," *Analysis* 41 (1981): 151.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁵Cf. Paulsen, "Comparative Coherency," 79. This idea is rooted in the theology of Joseph Smith's King Follett Discourse in which is taught that God "was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did" and that human beings "have got to learn to be Gods... the same as all Gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one." See Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City:

Deseret, 1976), 346-47 (hereafter abbreviated *TPJS*).

¹⁶David and Randall Basinger, "Divine Determinateness and the Free Will Defense: Some Clarifications," *Philosophy Research Archives* 8/1517 (1982): 531-34.

¹⁷Ostler, "A Real Problem for Evangelicals," 203.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*, 206-207.

²¹So Paulsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil," 55.

²²This does not mean that Mormonism is immune from problems of evil though. As John S. Feinberg has rightly observed (even if he presses the point a bit too far) each theological or atheological system has its own problem(s) of evil to solve peculiar to its truth claims. See his *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). In "Can the Real Problem of Evil Be Solved?" I briefly discuss three problems that arise from Mormon explanations of evil. (1) Mormon explanations naturalize evil, making it a constituent part of an uncreated universe. This renders irrational our outrage, indignation, and innate sense that evil is alien and unjust. (2) Because both good and evil are fundamental to reality, Mormon explanations imply a cosmological dualism (or pluralism) that conflicts with biblical revelation. (3) Because Mormon solutions explain at least some evil by appeal to the intractable nature of uncreated matter and the eternal principle of "opposition in all

things,” it is impossible for God to overcome evil in the way that both biblical and Mormon eschatology foretell. When the Mormon says that God is not responsible for what he did not create, it is assumed that God is not responsible because he did not determine its nature *and* that he does not have the power to change its nature. But if that is the case, then he is eternally stuck with those things outside his control that cause evil. He can employ strategies to cope with the situation, but he cannot overcome evil. B. H. Roberts recognizes this point when he says, “evil exists eternally, active or potential, in the very constitution of things” and that God cannot “prevent evil and destroy the source of it” (*The Truth, The Way, The Life*, 381, 382). Roberts, however, failed to face up to the implications this has for Mormon eschatology. Other serious difficulties arise from Mormon explanations of evil as well.

²³Cf. *TPJS*, 351.

²⁴In “Can the Real Problem of Evil Be Solved?” I observed that in Mormon theodicies some evil is attributed to the intractableness of matter (216). Blake Ostler disputed my point when he stated in reply, “Is chaos really intractable in Latter-day Saint thought in the sense that it constrains God’s will? Hardly. God speaks; chaos hears and obeys God’s will” (“Real Problem for Evangelicals,” 212). Note that Ostler has changed the terminology. I did not say that *chaos* was intractable in Mormon thought, as if God could not impose order upon a chaotic state of affairs. I never disputed

the point that the Mormon God can order chaotic matter, but I would dispute that he can order it any way he wishes with no constraints whatever imposed by the uncreated nature of that matter. If the uncreated nature of self-existing matter, principles, and intelligences impose no constraints on God, then he is effectively as powerful as a God who creates *ex nihilo* and it makes no sense for Mormon authors to cite these environmental factors as explanations for why the God of Mormonism is not responsible for evil. And, contrary to what Ostler disingenuously allows his readers to believe, appeal to the intractableness of matter has been a staple of LDS theodicies. For example, in the quotation from B. H. Roberts cited below, note his reference to the “intractableness of the material” with which God had to work. Most LDS discussions of the problem of evil draw heavily from the views expressed by Roberts.

²⁵See *TPJS*, 181, 351-52; cf. Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (5th ed.; Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1891), 37-38; Carl S. Hawkins and Douglas H. Parker, “Law: Divine and Eternal Law,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:809. A dissenting opinion is expressed in Rodney Turner, “The Imperative and Unchanging Nature of God,” in *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, ed. Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1990), 214-15.

²⁶This is even more explicit in *TPJS*, 208, 352, 353.

²⁷Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1959), 24.

²⁸Cobb and Madsen, “Theodicy,” 4:1473.

²⁹This is generally recognized by LDS philosophers even if they do not like the term “finite.” Within Mormon thought there is also a strain which has been described as “neo-absolutist Mormonism” (Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* [Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001], 98-100). Some Mormon thinkers in this category would insist that God really does have all power. For example, Stephen E. Robinson categorically rejects the idea that God is finite and insists on taking his scriptural texts at face value (see Robinson’s reply in Matthew R. Connelly, “Sizing Up the Divide: Reviews and Replies,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 3 [1999]: 175-76). These thinkers rarely address the problem of evil, though cf. Robert L. Millet’s recent statement: “Latter-day Saints believe that God is all-powerful, that he *could* prevent all suffering, stop all abuse, remove even the possibility of inhumanity, and erase all pain—but he will not” (*The Mormon Faith: A New Look at Christianity* [Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1998], 61). He goes on to say that the reason God will not stop all evil is to preserve free agency. Elsewhere, however, he seems to recognize that Mormonism’s denial of creation *ex nihilo* means that God is not omnipotent in the same sense as the God of orthodox Christianity (“The

Supreme Power over All Things: The Doctrine of the Godhead in the Lectures on Faith," in *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, 223, n. 1). Because "neo-absolutist" Mormons have had almost nothing to say about the problem of evil, our attention will remain exclusively on the statements of those Mormons who have.

³⁰Book of Abraham 3:22 can be read to imply that God organized intelligences at some point prior to creation, perhaps from some basic "stuff" called "intelligence" (cf. D&C 93:30). But the phrase "the intelligences that were organized before the world was" only demands that they be viewed as not needing to be organized as part of the creation. They were already organized and it may be that self-organization accompanies their self-existence. Indeed, the idea of self-existence may imply self-organization, otherwise it is difficult to distinguish the self-existent entity as some *thing*.

³¹*The Truth, the Way, the Life*, 381. In passing it is worth noting that this does not get the Mormon God off the hook as neatly as Roberts assumed. In LDS theology embodied beings have more power than unembodied spirits (see *TPJS*, 181) and unembodied spirits (like the devil) have greater power than mere intelligences. God could have refrained from begetting any intelligences that were internally corrupt or evil and thereby severely limited their power to act. If the Christian must ask why God would create an angel that would become a devil

the Mormon must ask why God chose to beget him and make him more powerful than he otherwise would have been. The Mormon also has to ask why someone like Hitler would be allowed to receive a body; surely God had some notion of how he would turn out based on the character he displayed in the preexistence.

³²This section is adapted from comments in my article "The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents and the Origin of Christian Deification," *Journal of Theological Studies* 56, no. 1 (forthcoming, 2005).

³³For example, third-person knowledge of mental events, no matter how exhaustively described, fail to capture the "knowing what it is like" of the first-person experience. Knowing these events in a first-person way is thus essential for the *qualia* of the events to be known at all.

³⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.38.1 [Sources Chretiennes 100:944].

³⁵Cf. *Ibid.*, 4.20.5-6; 4.38.3.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 4.26.1; cf. Dan 12:3.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 4.38.1.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 4.38.4 [Sources Chretiennes 100:958].

³⁹*Ibid.*, 4.38.3.

⁴⁰The summary in *Against Heresies* 5.1.1 effectively narrates the theological story behind this argument. For further discussion of the argument itself, see Michel Aubineau, "Incorruptibilité et divinisation selon saint Irénée," *Recherches de science religieuse* 44 (1956): 25-52.

⁴¹Paulsen and Ostler, "Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making," 258.

⁴²See further Mosser, "The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82."

