

The Origins and Implications
of the Contemporary Mormon Belief in the Eternality of Personality

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I will:

- (1) describe the dominant contemporary understanding of the person in Latter-day Saint (i.e., Mormon) culture
- (2) give a brief chronology of how that understanding came to be, and
- (3) to talk briefly about implications of the dominant belief

Historically there have been alternatives that I will not take up. There are also contemporary alternatives, but I will not deal with them either, sticking to the history of the development of the most common understanding of persons in Mormonism and to some of its implications.

Dominant contemporary belief = persons are essentially eternally existent, uncreated individuals. That uncreated being is the core of the spirit. God created the latter at a particular time in the past, presumably using intelligence as the material of the spirit. The spirit and the body are, together, the soul (D&C 88:15).

Whether one accepts that dominant belief or one of the historical or current alternatives, the LDS belief is radically pluralist from the beginning, though Mormons account for that pluralism in more than one way and today's dominant view took almost 100 years to develop.

Name for what is essential to a person = "intelligence"

1828 Noah Webster: "intelligence" = (1) understanding or skill; (2) notice or information; (3) "commerce of acquaintance"; and (4) "*a spiritual being*"

1830-31 Revelation to Abraham received through JS:

"And the Lord said unto me: These two facts do exist, that there are two spirits, one being more intelligent than the other; there shall be another more intelligent than they; I am the Lord thy God, I am more intelligent than they all." (Abraham 3:19)

Connectives? The oddities of this text leave considerable room for exegetical exploration and experimentation, but few Mormons have taken up that challenge.

Becomes an important proof-text for later theological thinking, but is largely ignored by early Mormons.

1833 D&C 93:29-30: "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be."

Some have argued that this probably refers to "ideal pre-existence" as in Gregory of Nyssa (Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15.1 (1982), 59-78).

As we will see, early Mormons usually understood this to refer, not to ideal pre-existence, but to a kind of spiritual material from which person's spirits are made.

Assumes an equivocation on "intelligence": the material from which spirits are made; but also spirits themselves. That equivocation was common and is easy to find in the writings of JS as well as later.

However, Webster's definition shows that the contemporary belief was at least implicitly possible for early Mormons.

Indeed, we have documents in which "intelligence" refers to sentient beings other than God, using it as others at the time are using it (Powdery, *Messenger & Advocate*, 1836).

So: "intelligence" is ambiguous in early Mormonism.

Nevertheless, documents contemporary with this revelation suggest that most Mormons at the time did not yet understand individual persons as having eternal pre-mortal existence.

1835 Persons of the Godhead unified in purpose but not in being: distinguishable entities—pluralism. The division of the Trinity into three individual beings rather than three persons in one may well have laid the ground for what came, 80+ years later, to be the dominant Mormon belief about other persons.

1839 Another factor in the development of that belief: JS's revelation "The Spirit of Man is not a created being; it existed from Eternity and will exist to eternity. Anything

created cannot be eternal, and earth, water &c—all these had their existence in an elementary state from Eternity” (Willard Richards, *Pocket Companion*, cited in Ehat & Cook 9).

Doesn't commit one to a particular understanding of what “Spirit of Man,” i.e. intelligence, means.

- 1841 What has a beginning must have an end—a principle often repeated (William Clayton, *Private Book*, cited in Ehat & Cook 60).

“We were all present” at “the first organization in heaven” (*ibid.*).

“That which is without body or parts is nothing” (*ibid.*).

This refers to God, but, combined with the denial of *ex nihilo* creation, it implies that the substance of persons has always existed, as per 1843 revelation.

- 1843 All spirit is material (D&C 131:7): the basis for what will come to be the dominant strain for understanding intelligence in early Mormonism: spirit / intelligence (early Mormons were not careful about using these terms as technical terms and, so frequently interchanged them) as the material from which souls are made.

- 1844 King Follett: eternal existence of intelligence: “Man existed in spirit; the mind of man—the intelligent part—is as immortal as, and is coequal with, God Himself” (Stan Larson, “The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text,” *BYU Studies* 18 (1978), 179-197, cf. 189.

Clearly using df. #4, “an intelligence = a spiritual being,” but not clear how to understand the being of such beings.

- 1844 Assassination of JS (27 June)

What “intelligence” meant had been ambiguous until approximately 1845. Earliest Mormons didn't devote a lot of time to systematizing Joseph Smith's revelations, nor did he.

- 1845 Eliza R. Snow (plural wife of JS and then BY) wrote “My Father in Heaven” (now “O My Father”): individual spirits are begotten by heavenly parents.

Individual existence appears to be understood to begin at the birth of the individual spirit. Intelligence is elemental, but not individuated as persons.

- 1849 Orson Pratt (early Mormon apostle): indivisible particles, each with some degree of intelligence, are the ultimate building blocks of all that exists. Everything has intelligence; it fills the universe. These intelligences are organized, and they communicate with and cooperate with each other. Leibniz?

Brigham Young strongly contested Orson Pratt's view (see Beregera "Orson Pratt–BY Controversies"), but his problem was with Pratt's understanding of God, not with his understanding of intelligence.

- 1853 Individual organized intelligences are made of spirit matter—Parley P. Pratt, Orson's brother and an early apostle (*Journal of Discourses, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 26 vols. 1:7-8.)

BY may not be consistent in his view:

- (1) "intelligence came from eternity, and is as eternal, in its nature, as the elements, or as the Gods" JD 1:2-3

This can be read as assuming individually eternal intelligences or that intelligence is the stuff from which individual souls are made.

As Ostler points out, BY believed that Sons of Perdition would be "dissolved back into their native Element" and lose their identity, suggesting that those individuals, as individuals, had been created from a native element. (Wilford Woodruff Journal, Feb. 17, 1856, JD 3:203; cited in Blake Ostler, "Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 66.

- (2) "the soul of man is eternal" JD 7:285 10:5

This could be understood to mean that the human soul is eternal after its creation.

- (2) However: there are numerous places in BY's public address where he speaks of God organizing individual souls (e.g., JD 2:135; 6:31; 7:285; 4:216; 8:205)

It is possible to make his view consistent if he was speaking of organizing souls after spirit birth, though that is not obviously the case.

Intelligence as some kind of spirit matter from which souls are created was the standard view from 1845 to c. 1900.

Not clear when that begins to change.

1895 October: Nels L. Nelson (BYU professor) identifies intelligence and uncreated ego in a church publication (Nels L. Nelson, "Theosophy and Mormonism," *The Contributor* 16.12 (1895): 737-738.¹

Rather than eternal spiritual matter from which spirits are created that are then incarnated in human bodies, Nelson proposes 3 parts to human persons: (1) intelligence, i.e., the uncreated ego; (2) the spiritual body created by God; and (3) the mortal body.

1904 Nelson: *Scientific Aspects of Mormonism* (NY: Putnam, 1904—first book on Mormon thought published by a non-LDS press)—repeats the claim about intelligence.

For Nelson, this tripartite view is the only satisfactory way to account for JS's teaching that spirits / intelligences are eternal *and* that there is a spirit birth through Heavenly Parents.

The belief quickly takes hold.

1905 Lycurgus A. Wilson, *Outlines of Mormon Philosophy* (SLC: Deseret News, 1905), report for leadership of the Church apparently written under special commission: "intelligences always were and always will be individual entities, and, however varied in capacity, never had a beginning and can never be annihilated" (42).

1907 B. H. Roberts: "independent, uncreated, self-existent intelligences" (*The Improvement Era*, April 1907, pp. 401-423)

1911 Roberts repeats his claim in *Seventy's Course in Theology*.

¹For my information on and understanding of Nelson and his work I have relied primarily on the unpublished paper of Michael Tiedeman, "A Faithful Thomas: Reinstating N. L. Nelson on the Early Twentieth-Century Mormon Intellectual Landscape," produced for the symposium on early Mormon intellectual history led by Richard L. Bushman and Terryl Givens at Brigham Young University, June-August 2007. See also Davis Bitton, "N. L. Nelson and the Mormon Point of View," *BYU Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (Winter 1973) 157-171.

In spite of its growing popularity, the belief is not without impressive objectors, including Charles W. Penrose and Anthon H. Lund, both of the two counselors in the First Presidency.

Penrose: "This doctrine has raised much discussion and the inference on which he builds his theory is very vague. The Prophet's speech delivered as a funeral sermon over King Follett is the basis of Bro. Roberts doctrine: namely, where he speaks of man's eternity claim. Roberts wants to prove that man is then co-eval with God" (Anthon Hendrick Lund Journal, 29 August 1911, 106)

Penrose and Lund correctly understood that if individual persons are eternal, then the absolute position of God is threatened:

1915 John A. Widtsoe (apostle) agreed with Roberts, but his opinion was expressed cautiously because of objections from senior ecclesiastical leaders.

Nevertheless he includes a strong statement in his lesson manual, *A Rational Theology*: :

It is clear that "man has existed 'from the beginning' and that, from the beginning, he has possessed distinct individuality impossible of confusion with any other individuality among the hosts of intelligent beings." (John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology* [Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1915], 16)

So, in spite of objections from the highest ecclesiastical leaders of the Church, the idea of eternally individual persons gained stronger and stronger hold among Mormons, including those in high but usually secondary ecclesiastical positions.

1919 James E. Talmage, another member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles and the president of the U of U:

"Individualism is an attribute of the soul, and as truly eternal as the soul itself" *The Vitality of Mormonism* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1919), 240, 321

NOTE: This development of the idea of intelligence is a significant part of what Mormons mean when they speak of "continuing revelation." Revelation comes not only through the mouth of the prophet who leads the Church—though it does come that way too. It often comes through the Church as a whole.

Hermeneutic: Mormons decide what they take to be doctrinal by each person in a theological discussion reasoning “on the basis of clear cases, *fitting the new question into a story that will place things in their best possible light*” (Nathan B. Oman, “Jurisprudence and the Problem of Church Doctrine,” *Element: the Journal of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology*, 2.2 (Fall 2006) 1-19, cf. 7 and 9-10; emphasis added.)

In the absence of definitive official statements by the LDS Church, the Mormon understanding of what constitutes doctrine is essentially an on-going hermeneutic.

Over time that hermeneutic process yields results that are not the decisions of any one individual or group of individuals, not even of authoritative individuals, but are nevertheless held by a majority of the Church.

1936 In spite of this growth, important church leaders continued to insist that the belief in eternally existent individual persons is not Mormon doctrine.

Joseph Fielding Smith, a Mormon apostle and son of a previous Mormon prophet as well as grand-nephew of JS and later himself president of the Church:

“Some of our writers have endeavored to explain what an intelligence is, but to do so is futile, for we have never been given any insight into this matter beyond what the Lord had fragmentarily revealed. We know, however, that there is something called an intelligence which always existed. It is the real eternal part of man, which is not created or made. This intelligence combined with the spirit constitutes a spiritual entity or individual. The spirit of man, then, is a combination of the intelligence and the spirit which is an entity begotten of God.” (Joseph Fielding Smith. *The Progress of Man* [Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Genealogical Society, 1936], 11)

JFS: we know there is something eternal and uncreated in the person, but we don't know and cannot now know whether it is eternally individual.

This or the view that intelligence is the non-individuated material from which souls are made continued to be the dominant view of the hierarchy. But those views also continued to lose ground to the view that souls are eternally individual.

At present I doubt that anyone knows what the majority view is among the highest councils of the LDS Church, but a recent official proclamation, “The Proclamation on the Family” suggests that it is the same as the majority of ordinary members.

Among other things, it says “Gender is an a essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.”

The strong implication is that the writers of the Proclamation understand the individual to be eternal.

It appears that for most Mormons the question is settled—individual persons are eternally co-existent with God.

Nevertheless, the philosophical / theological question of how to understand intelligence remains an important one.

The crux of the disagreement between the two major views (intelligence as stuff; eternally individuated intelligence) appears to be the question of God’s absolute character.

Historically there have been three general ways to understand JS’s teaching:

1. Intelligence is the material from which all persons but God the Father are made. The status of the Son and the Holy Ghost is unclear.

God remains absolute; sovereign

This may be the original position among Mormons, but as we saw it is not clear how early Mormons thought about the question or even whether they did.

This may be the view behind late objections to the contemporary view (Penrose and Lund)

2. Intelligence is the material from which all persons, including God are made.

God is finitistic and must have an origin. Some force must have brought God into existence—but what?

This is a variation on the oldest position. It accounts for many of the unusual beliefs ascribed to Mormons, though it seems to have been popular mostly during the second half of the 19th century.

E.g.: “As man is, God once was; as God is man may become” —Lorenzo Snow (1840)

This view puts the sovereignty of God in question—though few who subscribe to this position recognize that problem.

3. Each person, including God, exists eternally as an individual entity (the dominant view today).

Finitistic—the existence of other eternal entities puts limits on God that we would not find in classical theism.

It doesn't require that some force have brought God into existence, though it is necessary that God is, in some sense, conditioned by beings other than himself. This view also limits God's sovereignty, but not nearly so much as #2.

It is not uncommon for Mormons to collapse #2 and #3, understanding intelligence in terms of #3 but picking up aspects of #2 when talking about the destiny of human persons—and when inferring an origin for God.

In spite of that, the two are logically separable. The finitism of #3 does not imply the finitism of #2.

#3 is also more compatible with the description of intelligences that we saw in Abraham 3:19: "And the Lord said unto me: These two facts do exist, that there are two spirits, one being more intelligent than the other; there shall be another more intelligent than they; I am the Lord thy God, I am more intelligent than they all."

Both #2 and #3 make it possible to understand human persons as possibly becoming like God, but #3 makes that notion of *theosis* more like Orthodox notions than like BY's and John Taylor's.

JFS's view (something of the human individual is eternal, but we don't know what) remains a viable option, but so does #3.

I don't think anyone holds to #1 any more, and I'm skeptical that #2 can be made to work.