



A God Who Is Morally Praiseworthy A Response to Carl Mosser

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Carl Mosser's thoughtful essay suggests that if God is free in the morally significant sense, as Latter-day Saints believe, then God can freely choose to do something less than what is perfectly good - or indeed even choose something genuinely evil.¹ But if it is even merely logically possible that God can choose to do something evil, then Mosser suggests that God is not trustworthy. Mosser argues that if God is morally free in this sense, then we have no logically guaranteed way to trust God. He also goes beyond this logical assertion and argues that since some of the gods have indeed fallen according to Mormon thought, it follows that this possibility is not merely a logical possibility, but is an actual possibility that must affect how Mormons relate to God. His essay gives Mormons much to ponder.

While I agree with Mosser that the God revealed in Mormonism is not logically guaranteed to always do what is perfectly good, I deny that absence of logical guarantees is a reason to distrust God or to worry that God could go wrong or might be evil. However, I claim something more – the notion of a god that is good of logical necessity leaves the notion of “good” vacuous and meaningless and is reason to believe that we cannot form an attitude of trust toward God at all. I question the very coherence of the concept of an essentially perfectly good God – a discussion that has been raging in recent years in the philosophical journals. I will only be able to refer to what the issues are and why I believe the very notion of a logically necessary, perfectly good being is incoherent. In addition, I argue that Mosser makes a number of evident logical mistakes in his reasoning about a God who is free in a morally significant sense.²

A. The Logical Framework of Essential Perfect Goodness

I admit to some consternation in Mosser's discussion of the notion of a perfectly "good" God. He correctly notes that I prefer the notion of a God that is free in a morally significant sense to the notion of an a-moral God that is perfectly "good" in whatever sense "good" can mean in referring to a being that is logically incapable of morally significant choice. Mosser states that in my discussion I don't explain "what there is to prefer in a God who could go wrong." (10) I suggest that Mosser must not have read what I explained or somehow just doesn't take what I say to be an explanation since I explain the reasons to prefer a morally free God at some length. I will undertake to do so again here briefly.

A few preliminaries will place Mosser's discussion into the context of the ongoing philosophical discussion of perfect goodness and divine impeccability. In the tradition adopted by Mosser, God is essentially perfectly good. It is not that God just happens to be good. God is essentially good in the sense that it is logically impossible for God to do anything less than what is perfectly good. Indeed, it is logically impossible for God to even do anything less than the greatest possible acts. I have six reasons that I believe such a view of God is incoherent from the get go.

First, I question whether it makes any sense to call a being "good" that cannot conceivably do wrong in a morally significant sense. Light poles do no moral wrong; but they aren't praiseworthy for doing nothing morally wrong because they are mere things that can't do anything having moral significance either. So merely not being able to do evil doesn't make a thing morally good or good in a significant sense. A God who is good of logical necessity is good in the same sense that I am human. God is essentially "good" and he never had choice about such "goodness". Am I morally praiseworthy for being a human? Clearly not. Why not? Because my being human is temporally and logically prior to any choice I could make. Whether I am human is not up to me and I have no choice about it. It is the same with God's essential goodness. What praise is due to God for being "good" when he literally has no choice about it? I submit none. Praise is due to those who could fail to do good but demonstrate moral excellence by doing good in light of that possibility. It is fairly clear that an essentially perfectly good being is not a moral being – not a being who could demonstrate moral excellence because moral goodness requires an ability to choose between good and evil. God's "goodness" is not moral goodness and lacks the moral excellence possible only for a being that is free in a morally significant sense.³

Of course the traditional theist could argue that God's nature is somehow up to God. But how could God be responsible for having the essential properties that he does? The traditional theist could adopt "theistic activism" or the Augustinian view that propositions are divine thoughts and properties are divine

concepts.⁴ Thus, divine concepts, like all other kinds of concepts distinct from God, depend on God's creative activity. From this view it follows that properties depend for their existence on God's activity. So according to theistic activism, essential properties depend for their exemplification on God's creative activity. Thus, God's exemplifying the essential properties that he does depends on God's activity. It follows that God's perfectly good nature is dependent on God's creating his nature which consists of the essential properties that he has. If something depends on God's creative activity, it also seems to follow that it is up to God. So God's essential properties are created by God because if God did not think his own existence, his essential properties would not exist. Thus, theistic activism entails that God's essentially good nature is up to God and he is responsible for having the nature that he has in this sense.

But it is fairly clear that theistic activism is incoherent because it involves a vicious circularity of explanation. Theistic activism entails both of the following:

(I) God's acting to form divine concepts is logically prior to his exemplifying the property of having causal powers to act.

(II) God's exemplifying the property of having causal powers to act is logically prior to his acting to form divine concepts.

(I) is entailed by theistic activism because God could not exemplify the property of having causal powers to act unless that property existed. Yet that property could not exist unless God exerted his causal powers to form divine concepts. Remember that given the Platonic assumptions underlying theistic activism, properties just are divine concepts. Further, (II) appears to be a necessary truth. God must exist to act at all. For anything to exist, even God, its essential properties must exist. It follows from theistic activism that God's existence depends on the divine concepts and the divine concepts depend on God's existence. Thus, it is logically impossible for both (I) and (II) to be true. From such reasoning, I conclude that theistic activism is false because it involves a vicious circularity. God's perfectly good nature cannot be up to God. Nor can God be responsible for having the property of being essentially good.

The second issue arises because God does not merely do that which is good, but to be an essentially perfectly good being, God must bring about the greatest possible state of affairs. Any being who brought about a state of affairs less good than it could have brought about would be less than perfectly good. If there is a best state of affairs, then only one world is possible for God and for us and there are no other possible worlds. On such a view, both divine and human freedom are impossible.⁵ Further, the concept of a best possible world seems to be analogous to the concept of the greatest possible integer – there is no such upper

limit to goodness of worlds. On the other hand, if there is no such best state of affairs, then it is impossible for God to be perfectly good. The problem is that no matter how great the state of affairs brought about by God, there is always a better state of affairs God could have brought about. Thus, the notion of a necessarily perfectly good being who always brings about the best state of affairs is incoherent. The problem isn't merely in the incoherence of the concept of a best state of affairs; but in the very notion of a being that is essentially perfectly good. No matter what God does, he could do better. No matter how good God is, he good be infinitely better.

Several answers have been attempted to this basic problem with the concept of perfect goodness. One is that God can just adopt a random method for choosing which world to create. However, a perfectly good God must choose a perfectly good random method for choosing a world or he is not perfectly good, and there is no such perfectly good random method.⁶ The most promising response is that God in fact creates all possibilities that have some net good. So God creates an actual infinity of universes ranging in goodness from barely justifiable to approaching absolute perfection as far as a created world can be.⁷ Whether an act that creates an actual infinity of worlds ex nihilo can be coherent is a very large discussion. But I doubt it – and given Mosser's endorsement of William Craig's arguments against the possibility of an actual infinite, so must he (admittedly ad hominem).

I have also argued at length that a being that cannot say “no” to a relationship, that must love without having a choice about it, cannot love in a fully interpersonal sense with the most valuable kind of love. If God is an essentially perfectly good being, then it is necessary that God loves. God has no choice but to love and cannot choose not to love us. But interpersonal love cannot be necessitated in this sense. Love is a choice by its very nature. I have argued that a being that has no choice but to love cannot love with the exalted kind of interpersonal love expressed by God for us in the scriptures.⁸ Thus, the notions of “essentially perfectly good being” and “perfectly loving being” are logically incompatible.

Most importantly, the notion that God is perfectly good, in the sense that no being having a divine nature can possibly sin, also wreaks havoc with any coherent Christology. Christ had both human and divine natures. It is evident that Jesus was fully human and thus was free to sin though he freely chose not to. Jesus was tempted and learned from the things that he suffered (Hebrews 4:15; 5:8-9; Alma 7:12-13). If it were logically impossible for Jesus to sin, then he was not truly tempted. If we assert that the single person Jesus Christ was free to sin in his human nature but could not possibly sin in his divine nature then the Nestorian heresy follows – there are two different wills and persons rather than one. What praise is due to Jesus if he refrained from sinning when it was impossible for him to do so? It is one thing if Jesus is perfectly good because of

the excellence of his freely fashioned character and steadfast courage in the face of the real possibility of sinning. It is quite another thing if Jesus refrains from sinning because it is logically impossible for him to do so. By freely refraining from sinning, his majesty of choice calls for our awe, respect and praise. If he refrains because he has no choice but to refrain, then he lacks such moral excellence and virtue. I have argued that no coherent Christology is possible if the doctrine of essential divine goodness is adopted.⁹

The next issue that I will raise is whether it makes any sense to say that we can trust God to be good if it is logically necessary that God is perfectly good. It is true that we can be sure that God will be perfectly “good,” whatever “being good” can mean for such a being. However, we cannot repose trust in a person if there is no possibility of that person failing to do what we trust that s/he will. If we “trust” God only if it is logically guaranteed that God is and will be good, then what we trust is not God, but logic. What traditional theists trust is not God, but their logical constructs of what they believe God must be before they will “trust”. If this kind of act is “trust” at all, it is a subpersonal kind of trust that lacks the value of interpersonal trust that persons can repose in each other. Yet trust is an essentially interpersonal act. We trust persons; we don’t trust things. We may be sure that things will act as they do; but we cannot repose trust in them. However trust is at the very core of faith in God. The person who takes the position that s/he will trust God only if God meets the criteria of logically necessary goodness really doesn’t trust God as a person at all. Rather, the trust is in the impersonal logical necessity – which is to say it is neither faith nor trust at all.¹⁰

I have previously discussed each of these issues at length. Indeed, I have addressed some of them in the very articles Mosser cites in his article. It is important to have these difficult issues in mind when we discuss the Mormon view of God who is free in a morally significant sense because it may be thought that a view of an essentially perfectly good being could be preferable given the challenges Mosser discusses. In fact, there is no coherent alternative in my view. The price to pay is absolutely prohibitive. It requires giving up the interpersonal notions of love and trust in relation to God – the two most central values of Christianity.

Nevertheless, as Mosser correctly points out, there is also a price to be paid for adopting the position that God has morally significant freedom and thus is free to choose what is wrong. Mosser is correct in his observation that "Mormonism's metaphysical commitments . . . may require us to reevaluate the manner in which we trust God." (12) However, I believe that the change is one that any Christian ought to welcome. Essentially the change is from a metaphysical sort of idolatry where trust is in logic and impersonal metaphysical guarantees of “goodness” as opposed to trust in a person who is free and who has demonstrated by personal excellence, love and steadfast character that he is

worthy of trust. God earned our trust by leading Israel out of Egypt and establishing covenant. God secured our trust in his love by sending his own Son to atone for us notwithstanding the suffering beyond comprehension entailed. In scripture, God demonstrates his trustworthiness by his loving and salvific acts. Not once in any scripture does God argue that he is metaphysically perfectly good and therefore we should trust him. The prophets don't argue that it is logically impossible for God to sin or do anything wrong so we should have faith in God. Rather, God demonstrates his covenant faithfulness by his mighty acts and thereby demands our allegiance. He manifests his trustworthiness in his dealings with his people and commands us to be loyal to him. The prophets don't logically prove it and ask us to be smart enough to see that their premises are correct. They are not doing the kind of onto-theology Mosser engages.

The scriptures are replete with assertions that we can trust Yahweh and the God and Father of Jesus Christ as a son trusts a Father, and that we can trust God as a husband trusts a wife. As Mosser notes, that is not the kind of trust that is given to God in the tradition that insists that God must be essentially impeccable. (13) Rather it is metaphysical trust that we can have in god. As I observed in my response to Beckwith, a god who cannot fail but to be "good" because it lacks the freedom to choose among morally significant alternatives cannot be trusted in any interpersonal sense. God is not a moral being on such a view.¹¹ A god who lacks moral excellence is deficient in very important respects.

Finally, if God is omnipotent in the sense that God can actualize any logically possible state of affairs consistent with his attributes, then God doesn't have the power to do acts that a mere mortal could perform. I can lie. God can't. I can break a promise. God can't. Why not? Well if God is essentially perfectly good, then it is logically inconsistent to believe that God can do anything wrong. But isn't it absurd to suggest that I have power to do things that an omnipotent being can't? To make the notion of God's omnipotence consistent with God's perfect goodness, it becomes evident that God must essentially lack the ability to perform acts that a mere human can perform. I suggest that thinking of such a being as omnipotent is incoherent. The response is generally that the notion of omnipotence does not require God to be able to perform acts inconsistent with his essential attributes. Yet if God lacks powers and abilities that mere humans have, then the notion that God is omnipotent or all-powerful is either severely compromised or logically eviscerated.¹²

B. Why Aren't We Already All Exalted?

In asking why intelligences aren't all already exalted if they have existed for eternity without creation, Mosser makes a fairly glaring logical error. If I have properly grasped his argument, he argues as follows:

- (1) Given eternal existence of intelligences, either: (a) we must all already be exalted; or (b) any who are not exalted must be incapable of being exalted due to some inherent flaw that prevents even God from exalting them.
- (2) Not (a) because mortals are a mixture of both good and evil and thus are not exalted.
- (3) Therefore, God cannot exalt those who are not already exalted after an eternity of existence.

Mosser assumes that we must either be already exalted, given eternity, or there is something inherently wrong with us that keeps us from being exalted. (5) It is a false dichotomy twice over. He makes a logical modal error in reasoning from "we could already be exalted given eternal time" to "necessarily we must be exalted given eternal time unless there is an inherent flaw that prevents us from being exalted." All that follows is the *tertium quid* overlooked by Mosser: "we are not exalted due to our free choices even though there is nothing essentially or inherently wrong with our character that prevents us from freely choosing to be exalted." Thus, he commits both a modal error and sets up a false dichotomy.

It is a fairly common modal error in logic to assume that, given infinite time, all possibilities must be realized. However, one of the possibilities that could be realized is that not all possibilities will be realized. It simply doesn't follow that if there is an eternity of time, then the intelligence must already be perfectly good or there is an inherent defect that cannot be overcome. What follows is only that they could be exalted; not that necessarily they must be. Thus, there is no basis for Mosser's assertion that "Ultimate salvation – exaltation – may not even be a possibility for many of us, regardless of what we attempt to do." (5) The problem is with the "regardless of what we attempt to do." Only a fatalist would accept such defeatism. It may be that we will resist God for all eternity, though fabulously unlikely given that God is the most persuasive being in the universe and has all eternity to work on it. It is nevertheless possible because we are always free to say "no" to the relationship of exalting grace that he freely offers to us.

Mosser assumes a value judgment driven by Calvinist theology. God must be able to save or damn whomever he wishes. Thus, he assumes that our salvation must ultimately be up to God or there is a flaw in God's salvific power. However, the explanation for this failure to become exalted in an eternity of past time is not in some inherent, eternal defect in us or in God's impotence to save us, or some inherent impediment that even God cannot overcome, but in our free will. The explanation is simply that God loves us enough to honor our decisions about our own destinies and the very nature of divine love requires such respect and honor for freedom. Not even God can force us or bring it about unilaterally that

we love him in return to his love. However, there is nothing in our inherent make up that prevents us from freely choosing to accept this relationship.

But surely, it may be responded, there must be some reason that the intelligences aren't morally perfect after an eternity of growth. There is a reason: we haven't freely chosen to be exalted – yet. To ask for a reason beyond free will is to assume that there is some cause or reason that dictates how one will choose. Yet that is contrary to the very fact that one's free acts are ultimately explained by one's own choices and not by facts or factors external to the agent. Further, there is a certain type of knowledge that can be gained only from experience. There is no limit to growth or learning in this kind of experiential knowledge. No matter how much I know, there is more to be learned through experience. There is no limit to the variety and kinds of new experiences that we can have. Indeed, even God could never fully possess or exhaust what can be learned only through experience. In fact, as I will discuss below in section D, Mosser himself gives us good reason to believe that experience itself is essential to having a certain kind of knowledge and that even God couldn't just create such knowledge in us by fiat. There is no other way to get this knowledge than by direct, first-person experience. This logical condition for having experiential knowledge applies even to God.¹³

C. Why Did God Empower Intelligences in Their Growth?

Mosser asks why God empowered “morally immature” intelligences to progress: “The Mormon must ask why God chose to beget [Satan] as a son . . . [or] intelligences who were internally corrupt or evil” when he could have “refrained from begetting [them] . . . thereby limiting their power to act.” (6) However, this is not a question a Mormon must ask since it assumes something no Mormon should accept, i.e., that there are any inherently evil spirits. Mosser assumes that LDS thought entails that God began his work of begetting spirits with those who were already “internally corrupt” and thus already had the status of “mass murderers, child rapists, and infamous leaders like Nero and Hitler.” (6) That assumption is false. God eternally works with intelligences that are always capable of choosing good or evil.

Further, there is a crucial false assumption built into Mosser's query: “If behavior in mortality reflects something of one's character in preexistence, as many suggest, then why were those known to be morally weak, underdeveloped in virtue, or base permitted to progress? To state the point differently, isn't God culpable for allowing wicked men to progress since he knew in advance what sorts of character they possessed? Indeed, he ensured that they would have greater power to accomplish their ends!” (7) Mosser here assumes that character is fate and allowed God to foresee how intelligences would use any additional

power granted to them. However, the very point of libertarian free will is that one is not determined or fated by one's character. We are works in progress. As Mosser admits: "Of course, the Neros and Hitlers of the world may have been virtuous and mature, just not especially noble in the preexistence. But if we accept that assumption, we are forced to conclude that progression from one state of existence to a higher one does not ensure constancy of character." (7) So we are back to a supposed dichotomy: either those who are wicked in mortality had fixed wicked character and God should not empower them to grow and thus give greater capacity to do evil, or character is so inconstant that moral growth at one stage cannot ensure goodness at another stage of growth. Mosser's query is thus: which will Mormons choose?

Mosser's query is decidedly not a question any Mormon ought to ask about Mormon thought. First, given libertarian free will, character is not an infallible predictor of how people will act because character is always dynamic and not a fixed cause of acts. Mosser erroneously reifies character into a fixed cause which gives God a basis to foreknow how persons will act in the future. That is a logically fallacious inference in many ways. It not only makes bad assumptions about the status of "character" as a cause of behavior, it also erroneously infers that God could have foreknowledge sufficient to be culpable based upon knowing such character. Further, I don't know any Mormons, and no justification from a single Mormon scripture or writing, that suggests that there are any intelligences that are inherently "internally corrupt" and therefore unable to freely choose what is good. Even Satan isn't "internally corrupt" in Mormon thought in the sense that Satan was destined to be evil from "the beginning." Nor are there any intelligences that are just bad eggs and inherently unable to freely choose what is good. Rather, they are free to choose good and evil. Even God doesn't foreknow precisely how intelligences will exercise their free will in advance. Thus, God is not indictable when they do so on the Mormon view. That of course is a far cry from the Calvinist "deity" who knowingly determines those he creates to do evil and burdens them with original sin that leaves them unable to choose the good.

So why does God empower the growth of weaker and less advanced intelligences? The answer is clear: out of love. Mosser's suggestion that God should refrain from such activity seems to me to be quite morally suspect. Mosser reasons that God shouldn't have empowered those who were lesser intelligences to progress because they might misuse their freedom. But isn't that just the risk logically entailed in morally significant freedom? Mosser suggests, in effect, that we should have chosen Satan's plan that guaranteed that everyone would be saved and "necessarily good" at the expense of free will. Once again, a Calvinist value judgment underlies Mosser's suggestion. That is like arguing that parents shouldn't assist their less intelligent or morally perceptive children to grow because they could grow up to be criminals and giving them such assistance will

just make them more effective criminals. The appropriate moral judgment, it seems to me, is that an all loving being would give whatever assistance for growth he can to all.

Mosser argues that God could be culpable given Mormon commitments because either: (1) there is something inherently wrong with an intelligence's established and fixed character that God "should have known about and in light of which he should not have permitted growth in mortality," or (2) there is something so inconstant in human character that God shouldn't take the chance. It is once again a false dichotomy: Either humans are too fixed to change or so wishy washy God shouldn't trust them with a chance at further growth through mortality. Humans aren't too fixed to change and God doesn't know before hand what they will freely choose. However, it doesn't therefore follow that humans are so wishy washy that they shouldn't be given a chance to grow in goodness toward godhood. In Mormon thought God is doing all that any being could do to inspire free individuals to enter into loving relationship with Him. No possible being could do more with respect to significantly free others -- not even the God of classical thought! Since love must be a free choice, God must leave it up to us to choose whether and when we will choose to accept his gracious love.

D. God's Creation of Morally Inferior Creatures

Ex Nihilo. Mosser compares the Mormon solution to the problem of evil with the evangelical view. Mosser suggests that an "Irenaean theodicy" (following the second century apologist Irenaeus) is adequate to respond to what he dubs the "gnostic argument." As Mosser presents it, the gnostic argument is that "God could have created humans free from the reality of the possibility of corruption and evil. But humanity is fallible, corrupt and prone to evil."¹⁴ Thus, God is culpable for creating creatures that are morally inferior compared to those that he could have created.

I believe that Mosser's Irenaean response is quite adequate to turn back this particular argument. Mosser suggests that God cannot create beings who are morally free and who are guaranteed to never go wrong. Neither can God create divine beings ab initio because divine beings must be uncreated and not even God can create uncreated beings. Thus, God isn't culpable because it isn't within the power of even a god who creates ex nihilo to do what is logically impossible.

However, there is another, much stronger argument. I argued that 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."¹⁵ "[The God of traditional theology] 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.¹⁶ I also argue that the classical god could have created a world without any natural evils at all.

God could have created creatures who are vastly more intelligent than we are. In fact, given traditional assumptions I cannot see any logical impediment to God creating creatures who are virtually omniscient. God could have created creatures who are wise enough, at the very least, to go wrong with much less frequency and intensity than we do. Humans often do evil out of stupidity and lack of consciousness of the complete consequences of our actions. We often go wrong because our faculties of judgment are impaired and not functioning well. For example, a person who strikes and kills a young child while driving a car due to negligence momentarily lacks sufficient wisdom and consciousness to avoid moral responsibility for the lapse of judgment and attention. Persons are culpable for such negligence. God could have created creatures who are not susceptible to such stupidity.

Mosser responds that even God cannot create out of nothing creatures who must have genuine qualities that can only be realized in a developmental process that takes time. It is logically impossible for God to create out of nothing yesterday a person who is 85 years old today. It takes 85 years of actual life to develop an 85 year old man. God could create a person who is physiologically identical to an 85 year old; but the person will not really be 85 years old. Further, not even God can create yesterday a man who has 85 years of experiential knowledge today. According to Mosser, it “essentially” takes 85 years to develop that kind of knowledge. Mosser comments:

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 these realities. . . . The way in which something comes to be known is, at least in 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. . . the past experience can be necessary in order for a thing to be the thing that it is.¹⁷

Mosser thus argues that not even God can impart experiential knowledge to creatures *ab initio* because some kinds of knowledge require a certain history and a certain kind of first-hand experience. A person cannot really possess knowledge imparted from another that can only be gained by immediate, first-person experience. Mosser doesn't distinguish between such experiential knowledge and

the possibility that God could just impart moral maturity to a person. He assumes that moral maturity requires the same kind of developmental process over time and the same kind of experiential knowledge to develop. The kind of moral knowledge and virtue at issue, he claims, can be gained only through immediate experience in a developmental process.¹⁸

In his article in the *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Mosser acknowledges David Paulsen's argument that an Irenaean theodicy assumes that moral goodness acquired through actual experience is more valuable than untried moral virtue that could be possessed without confronting real moral challenges.¹⁹ However, it is difficult to see how Mosser's argument for God's non-experiential and undeveloped "perfect goodness" escapes Paulsen's argument that God's undeveloped goodness is therefore less valuable than developed human goodness.²⁰ Mosser maintains that God has perfect goodness and complete knowledge without having developed it through first hand moral experience. The basic value judgment supporting the Irenaean argument upon which Mosser relies is that a tested moral goodness developed over time is preferable to a perfect innocence that could be created directly out of nothing by God. As John Hick stated the basic moral assumption of the Irenaean theodicy: "One who has attained to goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptations, and thus by rightly making responsible choices in concrete situations, is good in a richer and more valuable sense than would be one created *ab initio* in a state of either innocence or virtue."²¹ Yet if this underlying judgment is true, then the hard-won goodness of creatures forged in the crucible of moral courage in concrete situations of temptation and the possibility of doing evil is superior to the supposed "perfect" goodness of God that supposedly God possesses without experience and without being confronted by the genuine possibility of evil.

Although Mosser doesn't respond to Paulsen's argument in his *SBJT* article, the form of the response Mosser would give is fairly evident. Mosser suggests in his *SBJT* article that those who compare God's undeveloped goodness with human goodness developed through the crucible of actual experience have misunderstood that there is a "distinction between the uncreated God and man, a creature today."²² With respect to those who claim God could have created morally perfect creatures *ab initio*, Mosser quotes Irenaeus who claimed that they "have failed to understand God and themselves and the necessity of humanity first being created susceptible to passions, to grow through experience and then later to be perfected."²³ Thus, the basic value judgment is that God's uncreated being necessarily entails that his perfect goodness is superior to developed goodness. However, such an argument is a non-sequitur. "X is uncreated" does not logically entail that "X is perfectly good." Nor does the notion that God is uncreated come close to logically entailing that "X's essential goodness is more valuable than developed moral goodness."²⁴

Therefore, there is a gaping hole in Mosser's reasoning here. We have no

explanation as to why God's "goodness" simply possessed by nature and without moral development is not morally inferior to developed human moral goodness. Mosser compares the virtue of persons created innocent to the virtue and superior moral goodness of those who have tried and tested moral mettle forged in concrete situations by making virtuous choices in the face of evil and temptation. It is fairly easy to see why such tried and tested goodness is morally preferable to mere created innocence which has much less moral value. Such "goodness" lacks moral value because it isn't a free choice and therefore does not express the goodness of a free will exercised in the context of courage facing the risk of evil. Why can't we make the same comparison with God's untried and undeveloped "goodness"? Mosser fails to see that some explanation must be given as to why this value judgment doesn't apply with respect to God. Mosser just assumes that such judgments cannot apply to uncreated being. However, Mosser never addresses how God's uncreated nature makes God's goodness exempt from the value judgment that untested goodness is less valuable than goodness developed through the exercise of free will. Moreover, what he does say about the relative value of tried moral goodness and untested goodness flies in the face of his arguments from God's supposed essential goodness.

The constant refrain from theologians in the tradition is that God's necessary being is different than our contingent existence. They follow this observation with an inference that therefore what is good for us isn't necessarily what is good for God. However, that inference surely doesn't follow logically and as an assumption just begs the question in an unacceptable way. This observation seems to often be raised more as a way to avoid the implication of a valid argument than to demonstrate the alleged superiority of God's putative essential goodness. It also violates the basic moral judgment made to support the Irenaean theodicy. We could as easily say that the goodness of creatures who are created virtuous *ab initio* is different than the hard-won virtue of creatures who are created with a morally vitiated nature and thus our judgments about what is morally superior don't apply. Further, that move is bankrupt because it simply says that our basic moral judgments don't apply to God either. Yet calling God "good" when our basic concepts of good and evil don't apply is to attribute a vacuous concept to God. It is like asserting that "God is X," where "X" just lacks any human meaning. What then is to prevent us from saying that God is perfectly good even though he slaughters a vast number of creatures just for the fun of it? After all, what is good for us isn't what is good for God. Once again, the response leaves us with a vacuous sense of right and wrong and moral goodness.

Further, how could God possess the kind of absolute knowledge attributed in the tradition if God must first have certain kinds of experience to possess that knowledge? If Mosser's argument is cogent, then certain kinds of knowledge essentially require a developmental process and first-hand experience to gain. Either God can know everything without experiencing it, or he cannot. If God

can possess perfect knowledge without first having first-hand experiences to gain experiential knowledge, then there is no reason that God can't impart a perfect knowledge to creatures *ab initio* and Mosser's response fails. If Mosser is correct, on the other hand, then God cannot possess perfect knowledge without having an experiential basis first, and thus God must be subject to learning forever because there is no end to the kinds of experiences that are possible from which God can gain experiential knowledge. But that entails that the Irenaean theodicy assumes a Mormon view of God's eternal progression and a being that forges moral goodness through concrete experiences in the face of the genuine temptation and the possibility of doing evil. Mosser can't have it both ways.

So the question remains for Mosser's so-called perfectly "good" God: why did God create creatures that are cognitively inferior and therefore less able to accurately assess their moral actions fully? The value judgments underlying Mosser's Irenaean theodicy are inconsistent with his insistence that God's untested goodness is superior to moral agency that is free to choose evil but does not do so. Further, Mosser does nothing to show the logical impossibility of created, free beings who are all-knowing and all-wise and thus for whom it is practically impossible that they choose to sin even though they are free to do so. "They won't choose to do evil given their wisdom" doesn't entail "it is logically impossible for them to freely choose to do evil."

There is something else that Mosser fails to address: I argue that his view is logically impossible because *creatio ex nihilo* is incompatible with the libertarian free agency assumed by the Irenaean theodicy. If we accept divine sustenance entailed in the idea of creation out of absolute nothing, then we are in every moment whatever God chooses to create us to be. Everything we do is immediately created by God given the occasionalism entailed by *creatio ex nihilo*. It follows that an Irenaean view of moral agency is impossible because the idea of free will that it requires is inconsistent with creation out of absolute nothing.²⁵ Now Mosser doesn't have to address every argument; but responding to this argument is essential to maintain the rationality of his project.

Finally, how does Mosser's Irenaean theodicy even begin to respond to the fact that the classical God could have had a world devoid of natural evils like cancer, earthquakes and AIDS? Avoiding an argument is not an answer to the challenge. Consider what creation of virtually omniscient creatures means. It means that the cure for cancer and aids is evident. It means that there would not have been a near decimation of the Native American population by smallpox because the vaccination would have already been known. It means that we could predict earthquakes and tornadoes with such accuracy that virtually no natural evils need be realized. It means that we could resolve global warming and all of our problems with pollution. Further, we could do it all freely. God had such an option open to him but elected to create creatures with limited intelligence. The god of the tradition isn't limited by the inherent capacities for intelligence of

uncreated selves as in Mormon thought. Thus, the god of the tradition could have created creatures already virtually omniscient who could avoid a vast number of natural evils that we suffer from without truncating free will at all. Further, such technical knowledge does not appear to require experience or experiential learning. There is no reason that the god of the tradition could not have simply created creatures *ex nihilo* with such knowledge.

God undoubtedly could have revealed such knowledge; but on the Mormon view we must be prepared through our growth in knowledge and intelligence to receive and understand such technical knowledge. Further, it appears that that is precisely what God did with respect to smallpox. We trust that God is preparing us even now for further light and knowledge that will lead to further breakthroughs with respect to aids, cancer and other natural evils.

E. Lossky's Dilemma Again.

What Mosser styles as Lossky's dilemma is likewise a false dichotomy. He argues that either: (A) the divine nature is essentially perfectly good and therefore humans don't possess the divine nature because they are not perfectly good, or (B) humans possess the divine nature and therefore the divine nature is not essentially perfectly good. However, this dichotomy is not truly logically exhaustive and is thus a false dichotomy. It may seem that either divine nature is essentially perfectly good or it isn't. However, Mosser's formulation leaves out another range of possibilities regarding perfect goodness: God is perfectly good, but not essentially so. God could always freely choose what is right and thus be perfectly morally good – though admittedly God would not then be essentially morally good even though perfectly morally good. Mosser argues that the problem arises in Mormon thought because even though humans have divine nature in the sense that there is no ontological barrier to their becoming fully divine or gods, yet we are obviously a mixture of both good and evil. Thus, Mormonism entails that the divine nature does not entail essential divine goodness.

However, I believe that we must be more precise to grasp the issue that Mosser is addressing. I take issue with Mosser's characterization of Mormon thought positing humans as divine *per naturum*. We are divine by nature in the sense that there is no ontological barrier to our becoming fully divine; however, we are not divine *per naturum* in the sense that we grow into gods just because we possess the divine nature. Humans such as us essentially possess divine nature but are not fully divine by nature. Let me explain.

There is a vast difference between the kind of life that alienated humans live and the fulness of indwelling unity that characterizes those who are fully divine. When Mosser says that humans are divine *per naturum* in Mormon thought, he is

quite right but in a misleading way. He is correct that there is no ontological impediment or impossibility to humans becoming everything that God is. He is correct that humans must already possess the same divine nature in a sense to be capable of receiving the divine glory when it is imparted to us. However, humans don't simply grow to become gods the way that children grow to be like their parents if they just live long enough. There is a vast qualitative difference between the alienated existence of mere mortals and the fully loving indwelling relationship of perfect unity enjoyed among the divine persons in the Godhead.²⁶

We become divine not *per naturum*, but by freely accepting the loving relationship graciously offered to us and abiding by the law of love that defines the mode of divine life. In so doing, we are transformed glory for glory into something quite different from alienated human existence. What follows is that mere mortals lack the divine power and perfect knowledge and wisdom that God or the divine persons in the Godhead possess. Thus, humans do not enjoy a fulness of glory and knowledge. Such a difference makes a vast difference in assessing God's trustworthiness and goodness as compared to mere mortals - as I will now discuss.

F. Will God Always Be God?

Mosser argues that if God could go wrong, then we cannot trust God. In light of the free will that God possesses, it is a logical possibility that God could cease to be God. However, Mosser argues that it is then possible that God could fall from His exalted status. Indeed, one of the chief beings in the council of gods, Satan, fell due to rebellion. Mosser concludes that it is just as possible for God to fall in Mormon thought. (8-9)

Worrying about whether God will fall is almost logically on par with worrying about whether President Monson will join the Hell's Angels. Yes, it is logically possible, it is just so fantastically unlikely given who and what President Monson is that it isn't a practical worry any sane person could have. It is vastly less likely that God would ever choose evil. There are several mitigating factors to Mosser's worry that God might fall if God has morally significant freedom. First, the LDS scriptures suggest that to qualify for exaltation one must first reach the point where one desires no more to do evil. (D&C 88) God has reached exaltation and thus no longer desires evil (though of course free to so desire were he to so choose). Second, to enjoy a fulness of deity entails entering into a perfectly loving unity of divine glory which imparts a fulness of divine knowledge. Thus fulness of deity entails that those who enter into a fulness of indwelling glory will have perfect knowledge and wisdom and will know all that can be known.²⁷ In addition, those who enjoy a fulness of deity participate as "one" "in" harmonious agreement with and commitment to one another. Such

divine love is the most constant love possible.

Mosser is correct, it seems to me, to this extent: God must be perfectly loving. God is free to choose not to love. Given the Mormon view, it could not be any other way since love must be a free choice by its very nature. However, how can we trust God if it is even merely logically possible that God would do something wrong or fail us? I believe that there is a very satisfying response to Mosser's query: Can we trust God to continue to freely choose to be God? We can trust God because we know of his moral excellence through our interpersonal experiences with God. Moreover, we can trust that God, as a perfectly rational being, will not do any act inconsistent with his perfect knowledge. Because God is all wise, God will never freely choose to do evil because God sees with pellucid clarity that wickedness never was happiness and is contrary to the joy inherent in a fulness of divine nature. Thus, because God has perfect cognitive faculties and wisdom, God will always freely choose what is best within his power because it is the wisest and most rational course of action. Thus, although it is logically possible that God could choose evil and God is free in a morally significant sense to do so, we can be assured by virtue of God's perfect intelligence that he will never freely make an evil choice. Is God free to be stupid? Yes, God is free, but God is too smart to be stupid. It is equivalent to suggesting that Einstein could fail a first grade math test. It is logically possible that he could, but no one could rationally worry about it because he has the capacity and motive to always pass the test.

Further, divine love is constant and committed with steadfast resolve. We can be perfectly confident that God will not do anything wrong out of sheer stupidity as we mortals so often do. We can rest assured that God will not do something wrong out of lack of consciousness. We can be absolutely assured that God will not do evil because he fails to recognize the consequences of his acts as humans often do. We can be sure that God will not do anything wrong because of weakness of will or because of bodily urges that are difficult for him to control. Thus, he will never violate a moral law out of stupidity or failure to be conscious of the best for us. Moreover, our trust in God arises from a knowing that surpasses mere excellence in logic, but involves our entire being in the most profound interpersonal sense possible – his light and truth shine in our hearts at our very core. If we can ever truly trust God, then we must know him in the intimacy of our hearts where he dwells in us. We know of his love because it is made manifest to us at the core of our being. It is logically possible that such a being could do something wrong, but in the presence of his love, trust in him is the only meaningful response. While it is logically possible that God could perform a morally wrong act, it is not a practical concern that we can have in relation to God if we know him. Merely knowing about him – merely knowing about the logical qualities of his nature – will never suffice for the demands of religious faith.

Satan is not an instance of a being who enjoyed the perfect unity and knowledge of the Godhead. He was an advanced being in the council of gods, but that doesn't entail that Satan enjoyed a fulness of divine glory. Those who are exalted, in contrast, enjoy such a fulness of glory with God. Thus, those who are exalted also enjoy the perfect knowledge and loving unity that characterizes those divine persons in the Godhead. It follows that Satan is not a counterexample to the steadfast love and commitment of those who enjoy such a fulness of divine glory.

G. Can We Trust a God Who Is Significantly Free?

Mosser suggests that if God's children go wrong, even terribly wrong, then that is evidence that we should not trust God (12-13). However, such a view misses the entire point of a free will theodicy. It is logically equivalent to refusing to trust a child's parent because the child took a walk on the wild side. Mosser's suggestion is logically fallacious. He argues in effect: If A has generated B, and B freely chooses to do something wrong, then we cannot trust A because B's act is evidence that A is morally untrustworthy. If the world is populated with free creatures, then God cannot control their actions or whether they choose good or evil. Whether we choose good or evil must be up to us as free agents that God allows space to choose. Thus, Mosser's argument that we must look at this world and determine whether we can trust God based on whether we choose good or evil is a logical error. He assumes that judgments of good and evil are transitive: If God has children, and his children are evil, then God is evil. That is a non-sequitur. Rather than judging whether the parent is a good person based on the child's behavior, I suggest that we learn to trust by getting to know the parent. "Life eternal" isn't based on mastering logic or grasping the metaphysical necessity of a perfectly good being; rather, life eternal is "to know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent." (Jon 17:3) Faithfulness and trust are interpersonal and not metaphysical.

Further, there is no possibility of trust in a God for whom it is logically impossible to freely choose to do evil -- so trusting a morally significant being is the only game of trusting relationships in town. We should trust God interpersonally because of the loving trust that we have based on his revealed steadfast love and commitment to our well-being. In this sense, Mosser is right that the trust Mormons must espouse is like the interpersonal trust that a wife has in her husband (and the scriptures are full of such comparisons). However, God is not as fickle as an unfaithful wife. The beloved is and cannot be guaranteed to always return the love; but love commits to love even in the light of that risk that is inherent in the very nature of love.

The explanation of our trust is based in God's superior intelligence, wisdom

and steadfast love. It would be irrational for God to do evil. Though free to be irrational, being irrational is irrational and all-wise beings freely choose not to be irrational. A God who is all-wise will see that being evil is the opposite of happiness. An all-wise being will also see with perfect clarity that it is stupid beyond belief to choose to be miserable when one could be happy. So we can be absolutely sure that even though there is not a logical necessity that God is good, there is a pragmatic certainty sufficient for faith in an all-wise being.

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NOTES

¹ Carl Mosser, "Exaltation and Gods Who Can Fall: Some Problems for Mormon Theodicies," in this volume. References in parentheses are to the typescript of Mosser's paper delivered at SMPT.

² I am also puzzled by what Mosser takes the problem of evil to be. He seems to think that the problem of evil is the problem of providing "explanations for the phenomena of evil." (12) However, the problem of evil has traditionally been understood to involve reconciling God's goodness and power with the existence of evil because they appear to be logically or practically incompatible. Mosser asserts that Mormonism easily resolves this central and, for the traditional view, intractable problem. I believe that he is correct: Mormonism has the strongest possible solution to the problem of evil. However, he believes that Mormonism must account for the existence of any kind of evil at all. Yet if that explanation is already provided in the freedom of eternal intelligences and the nature of the uncreated realities in the universe, then what is it that remains to be explained?

³ Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Love of God and the Problems of Theism* (SLC: Greg Kofford Books, 2006), ch. 3.

⁴ "Theistic activism" is suggested by Thomas V. Morris, "Absolute Creation," in *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 161-78.

⁵ Theodore Guleserian, "God and Possible Worlds: The Modal Problem of Evil," *Nous* 17 (1983): 378-88; M. J. Coughlin, "Must God Create Only the Best Possible World?" *Sophia* 26 (1987): 15-19; William W. Rowe, *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) .

⁶ Klaas J. Kraay, "Can God Choose a World at Random?" in Y. Nagasawa and E. Weilenberg, eds., *New Waves in Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), forthcoming. S. Grover, "Why Only the Best is Good Enough," *Analysis* 48 (1988): 224; William W. Rowe, "The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom," in *Reasoned Faith*, Eleonore Stump ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 223-33; B. Langtry, "God and Infinite Hierarchies of Creatable Worlds," *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (2006): 460-76. K. Kraay, "Divine Unsurpassability," *Philosophia* 25 (2007), 293-300.

⁷ D. Turner, "The Many-Universes Solution to the Problem of Evil," in R. Gale and A. Pruss, *The Existence of God* (Aldershof: Ashgate, 2003), 1-17; L. Strickland, "God's Problem of Multiple Choice," *Religious Studies* 42 (2006), 141-157. Michael Bergmann and J. A. Cover argue that God can be responsible for what he does though not free to do otherwise by adopting semi-compatibilism and arguing that God agent-causes what he does. They argue that an agent cause is responsible for what it brings about because nothing else could cause what is agent caused. "Divine Responsibility Without Divine Freedom," *Faith and Philosophy* 23:4 (2006), 281-408. However, their view of "agent causation" as a mere random uncaused cause "for reasons" is internally inconsistent. If God acts for reasons and those reasons are entailed by God's essentially perfectly good nature, then the reasons issuing from God's nature entail that God acts of logical necessity and has no control over what his nature entails and therefore cannot be responsible for what he does. If God is not responsible for what it does, then God is not praiseworthy either.

⁸ Ostler, *The Problems of Theism and the Love of God*, chs. 1 and 3.

⁹ Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (SLC: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), ch. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Blake T. Ostler, "The Relation of Moral Obligation and God in LDS Thought," in *Discourses in Mormon Theology*, James M. McLaughlin and Lloyd Ericson eds. (SLC: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 133-58.

¹¹ Ostler, "Moral Obligation," 139-48.

¹² Eric Funkhouser, "On Privileging God's Moral Goodness," *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (2006), 409-22; Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (SLC: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), ch. 3.

¹³ Mosser also erroneously assumes that if God creates worlds that pass away to give way to a new world, that God is "destroying worlds" because they are failures and God cannot insure their salvation. However, that isn't true in Mormon thought. This earth will pass away and be destroyed in a sense, but it will then be transformed into a kingdom of paradisaical glory. (D&C 88) God hasn't failed; he has succeeded in bringing about salvation for those who freely accept his kingdom and bring it about by their love. However, it just may be that God could fail to save everyone because salvation depends on each person's free choice and not God's alone.

¹⁴ Carl Mosser, "Evil, Mormonism, and the Impossibility of Perfection *Ab Initio*: An Irenaeian Defense," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 9:2 (2005): 56-68. Mosser in responding to my article, "Evil: A Real Problem for Evangelicals," *FARMS Review* 15:1 (2003): 201-13; and also to David L. Paulsen and Blake T. 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. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo: Utah: FARMS, 2002), 237-84.

¹⁵ Paulsen and Ostler, "Sin, Suffering and Soul-Making," 248.

¹⁶ Ostler, "Evil: A Real Problem for Evangelicals," 206-07.

¹⁷ Mosser, *Ibid.* at 62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Mosser wrote: "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 what is right. *This could be created only through experience.*" *Ibid.*, 63, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Ibid., 58.

²⁰ David L. Paulsen, “Divine Determinateness and the Free-will Defense,” *Analysis* 41 (June 1981), 150-53.

²¹ John Hick, *Evil and the Love of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 380-81.

²² Mosser, “Evil, Mormonism,” 63.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ An Anselmian may argue that the notion that God is the greatest conceivable being logically entails both that “God exists of necessity” and that “God is perfectly good by essence” because a being that is essentially good is greater than one that isn’t. However, I believe that the Anselmian argument from perfect being begs the question – it assumes what must be proved regarding which is the more valuable kind of goodness. Further, the Anselmian must show that the notion of “essential goodness” is coherent before it can be employed to draw conclusions about what our notion of the “greatest conceivable being” entails.

²⁵ See my discussion of this in *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism and the Love of God* (SLC: Greg Kofford Books, 2006), 409-29.

²⁶ I discuss this issue at length in ch. 9 of *Of God and Gods*.

²⁷ I discuss these entailments at length in *Exploring Mormon Thought: Of God and Gods*, ch. 9.