

Agents unto Ourselves: Free Will Vs. Determinism

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You and I can change the world;
The more we live, the more we learn, the more we know.
From this moment on we share the world;
The more we give, the more we love, the more we grow.
The spirit of imagination can lead us through the dark;
The more we see, the more we try, the more we show.
The evidence of our confusion, life has left its mark;
The more we fear, the more we lie, the more we hide.

As we walk into tomorrow
Holding the future with our hands ...

Together you and I, we hold the key to all the answers.
(from “The More We Live - Let Go” by Squire & Sherwood, from the Yes album *Union*)

These words come from a song called “The More We Live – Let Go” by a musical group known as “Yes.” I like the song because, like many of the scriptures, it points out that in this life we can chose to give, love, and grow or we can chose to fear, lie, and hide. I also like the bright optimism of the song in saying that the future is in our hands – that we have the power to change the world.

I believe this optimism to be completely justified because of my faith in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ as taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I believe that together, as the song says, we literally “hold the key to all the answers.”

This opportunity to make free choices and to jointly create a brighter future was forged for us in the pre-Earth councils and in the great tumultuous debate that we refer to as the War in Heaven. There a plan was devised and put into motion that allowed us this opportunity to experience the joys and trials of the flesh.

In the Book of Mormon, Lehi explained this plan as follows:

Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.
And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given.

Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and

death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.

And now, my sons, I would that ye should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit;

And not choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in his own kingdom. (2 Nephi 2:25-29.)

That is an interesting phrase in verse 29: “the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil the power to captivate.” Two verses earlier we are told that we are “free according to the flesh” and here we are told there is a “will of the flesh” which contains evil that the devil can use to “captivate” us.

So, at the same time, our flesh gives us the potential for freedom, liberty, and eternal life and the potential for captivity. The difference, according to Lehi is whether we look to Christ, obey his commandments, and be faithful to his words (verse 28), or whether we allow the needs of the flesh to “captivate” us.

I don't read these verses as saying that the needs of the flesh are evil as such. Verse 27 clearly states that some things of the flesh “are expedient unto man.” Obviously such needs as food, water, sleep and shelter are basic survival needs. I believe the scripture is warning us that Satan will attempt to subvert the needs of our flesh to his ends by such tricks as overemphasizing their importance, or distorting our priorities, or promoting overindulgence. Our challenge is to put the needs of the flesh into their proper perspective and to control them rather than letting them control us. Of course, this isn't necessarily easy.

The human body has many needs. It would appear not all of them are meant to be “overcome” in the repentance sense of “forsaking them.” Some bodily needs are essential to survival and others, such as our comfort and entertainment needs, are important to our productiveness and even to our sanity.

My daughters like to play a computer game know as “The Sims.” This game consists of a computer-generated world in which the player creates and then “plays with,” little computer people know as “Sims.” The player can build a house for the Sims and can, to some degree, control what the Sims do. The Sims eat, sleep, go to work, and socialize in this artificial world according to rules designed to simulate real life. These rules, or “motives,” as they are called in the game, can cause a Sim to disobey or delay a response to a command issued by the human player. For example, if a Sim is tired and the human player instructs him to make dinner, the Sim may simply fall asleep rather than begin cooking.

The “Sims” game lists eight human “motives”: Hunger, Comfort, Hygiene, Bladder, Energy, Fun, Social, and Room (meaning Environment). In the game these motives can be displayed as bar graphs for a given Sim character indicating whether the motive is currently satisfied or whether it needs attention. Every one of the motives degrades over time and the player must always be mindful of the needs, or motives, of her Sims if she wants them to accomplish other tasks.

As I was typing these words, I took a break from the computer to seek some dental floss. It seems a piece of lunch was lodged in my molars and it had finally become bothersome enough to interrupt my creative process and insist on being taken care of immediately. This, of course, is an example of a “hygiene” need, and just like in the game, if one ignores the need it becomes gradually more insistent until you take care of it.

As I came back to the keyboard, I brought with me an ice cream sandwich. I’m not sure if the ice cream was to fill my hunger motive or my comfort motive, but you see the point. These types of detours in our productive or creative lives to take care of physical needs are so common that we hardly notice them. Perhaps it would be profitable to examine their purpose.

Let’s assume for a minute that we are the Sims. I don’t mean to imply that we are puppets and God is a cosmic game player who is pulling our strings. That would be pushing the metaphor too far. I am just interested in exploring the possible reasons why this life is the way it is.

The big question I am trying to examine here is, “What is the purpose of life?” The typical Mormon answer to this question is “To gain a body and to be tested.” Once we give that answer, we then tend to focus almost exclusively on the “to be tested” part and pay very little attention to the “gain a body” part of the answer. So when I ask “What is the purpose of life?” I mean specifically “What is the purpose of *this* kind of life?” What is the purpose of all the hours we spend eating, sleeping, washing, eliminating, resting, playing, and socializing? What is the Heavenly purpose of giving us a life that is so full of “Sim” activities? What are we to *learn* from all of these mundane activities in which we invest so many of our mortal hours?

Accepting the Mormon belief that this life is both an audition and an internship for potential Godhood, the activities of daily life must have some connection with our eternal future. At the very least, the physical hungers and needs of our bodies are intended to teach us valuable lessons. Among these are such lessons as: patience, cause and effect, randomness, diversity, prioritizing, decay, regeneration, compromise, temperance, and moderation.

In addition to the lessons our physical bodies make possible in this life, it is also entirely possible that the Gods themselves eat, sleep, wash, eliminate, rest, play and socialize. Given the fact that Mormonism teaches the literal and Eternal resurrection of the body, and given that the body is specifically designed to perform certain functions in certain ways, I personally believe that, as least as far as bodily functions go, the Gods live much as we do.

I believe the difference between Gods and men is that the Gods are able to control their environment, while men are controlled *by* their environment. In other words, the Gods are those who, like Jesus, have “overcome” their worlds (John 16:33). Their lives are no longer “determined” by the circumstances that surround them. Rather, they have reached a state of “freedom to act for themselves” rather than be “acted upon”.

According to the Book of Mormon verses quoted above, the redemption of Christ makes us *all* “free to act for ourselves and not to be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:26). In this sense, we are like the Gods – at least in principle. According to these verses, the one exception to our freedom is that the law will punish us at the judgment day if we violate the commandments.

The big question I am trying to raise here is how often do we actually “act for ourselves” rather than allow our physical needs, or “motives,” to make our decisions for us? How often do we break out of our daily deterministic patterns and actually exercise our free will?

According to the Harper Collins Dictionary of Philosophy, determinism is “the view that every event has a cause,” and that “given a set of conditions X, it will always be followed by the set of conditions Y.” Mormonism has no quarrel with the idea of causality. Despite its strong emphasis on visions, prophecy, angels, priesthood, temples, pre-earth and post-earth life, Mormonism is a literal, not a mystical religion. The Doctrine and Covenants has a very strong statement of support for the idea of causality.

And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which the blessing is predicated.” (D&C 130:21.)

Mormonism can support the idea that a “set of conditions x” will always lead to a “set of conditions y,” indeed, one can view the commandments as practical, cause and effect guidelines to help one make the choices that will maximize one’s blessings.

However, unlike Determinism, I believe Mormonism makes a critical distinction between the actor and the stage. Determinists hold that human choice is a function of the human brain, and therefore is ultimately just a function of brain chemicals and prior synaptic development. They postulate that if we just knew enough about the brain, or enough about a person’s prior experiences that formed structure of his brain, we could unfailingly predict what choice a person would make in any given situation.

The Harper Collins Dictionary of Philosophy defines the Theory of Free Will as “the belief that, given again the same conditions, humans can will to do otherwise than what they did do.” Free Will, itself, is defined as “the belief that the will is free in the sense of not being caused or determined by anything else. That is, it is independent of antecedent physiological, neurological, psychological, and environmental conditions.”

Well if you remove physiology, neurology, psychology, and the environment as factors in human choice, what is left? For Mormons the answer is Spirit. We believe there is an actual, conscious, independent, spiritual being who inhabits our bodies; and that, ultimately, it is this spiritual being who controls our physical choices.

I believe that Mormonism, while acknowledging the basic cause and effect nature of the world, calls upon its followers to literally rise above our worldly nature and exert spiritual control over our physical world. We are expected to overcome the inertia of our physical motivations and exercise our individual free will to make the world a better place.

For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward.

Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;

For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward.

But he that doeth not anything until he is commanded, and receiveth a commandment with doubtful heart, and keepeth it with slothfulness, the same is damned. (Doctrine and Covenants 58:26-29.)

Consider what this scripture says to the Mormon who does everything he is told, but *only* what he is told. This seemingly good and “active” Mormon will not only receive no reward, but is actually in danger of damnation. There is no virtue in doing the right thing if you were compelled to do it. This was the flaw in Lucifer’s plan during the War in Heaven. He wanted to compel righteousness. Apparently he did not understand that “forced righteousness” was an oxymoron.

My contention is that perhaps the purpose of this Earth life can be found in the tension between determinism and free will. What if we are here precisely to become aware of and break out of our deterministic patterns? To do the atypical? To enlarge the possible? To reach beyond the expected into the unexpected? I believe we were sent here, not just to survive and get by, but to try new things, to learn and grow, to magnify our talents, to enlarge our capacities, to celebrate and use our God-given gifts.

I was captivated by the recent film “Minority Report” which was based upon a story by science fiction writer Philip K. Dick. The story dealt directly with the issue of determinism vs. free will. The concept involved a future society in which a police agency known as “Precrime” arrested potential murderers *before* the crime was committed. They were aided by three psychics who “saw” the crime in advance and provided the Precrime officers with the names of both the victim and the perpetrator. The proof of their accuracy was that no murders had occurred since the program had begun. This, of course, would indicate that they had successfully incarcerated all those who would have committed murder, but leaves the dilemma of whether people who may have had “murderous thoughts,” but who would not have followed through on those thoughts, had also been locked up.

The major conflict in the drama is that the main character, a Precrime officer played by Tom Cruise, is identified as the future murderer of a person he doesn’t even know. The day and time of the future murder are known, so the plot unfolds as events lead the main character inevitably toward the time, place, and victim of the foreseen murder. As the destined time is minutes away, he finds himself in the right place, in the presence of the right victim, and at the last minute he is finally given the missing motive for a police officer to kill this complete stranger. He pulls out his gun and points it at his victim, but just before he pulls the trigger the voice of another character in the story says to him desperately, “You can choose. You can choose.”

I won’t tell you what happens in the story, but I want to say that it is my belief that even in the most horrible, desperate, circumstantial, fated, deterministic situations, we have been given by God the power, and the right, to choose. In some cases it may seem that our range of choices is severely limited. Sometimes it seems that we have to choose between two evils. Sometimes even the right choice seems to have negative consequences. And, we have no promise that this life will be comfortable or easy.

But I believe absolutely that the way we react to whatever situation we are in is totally up to us. I believe that in choices of right and wrong, we cannot be forced. We are guaranteed the agency to act for ourselves. This promise is a direct result of the War in Heaven. It is an essential part of the plan of the Father, and of Jehovah, that we all

supported. I do not deny that our individual struggles may be very difficult, (believe me, I know), but Satan's power is severely limited when we look him in the face and say, "No, I will not." With priesthood power, Satan can be cast out completely.

So, what is important in this life? How do we decide what to do with our time? Well, first of all, we should probably get into the regular habit of asking those very questions. What should I be doing? What should my priorities be? The well-known LDS film "Man's Search for Happiness" points out that all we really have in this life is Agency, the ability to make choices, and Time, a period in which our choices and their consequences can play themselves out.

The poet, Robert Bly wrote:

The world of most men and women is a flat horizontal world of wage-earning, driving, child care, taxes, malls, football games, hairdressers, getting by, eating, and working. The vertical world, in which the soul descends to the lower realm of the Dead, or rises to the upper realm of divine energies, is increasingly rare in our day. (Robert Bly "The Maiden King" p. 81)

Bly isn't saying that the vertical world has somehow gone away. He is pointing out that in our modern consumer-oriented world we no longer seek spiritual energy.

The opening theme to "The Lion King" describes our situation well.

From the day we arrive on the planet and, blinking, step into the sun, there's more to see, than can ever be seen, more to do than can ever be done" ("The Circle of Life" from *The Lion King*, lyrics by Tim Rice).

Exactly. This puts an interesting twist on our probation here because while the range of possible choices we can make is extensive, and for us affluent modern Americans virtually limitless, the amount of time we have been given is not only severely limited, but unpredictable. We might anticipate 70, even 90, years to "eat, drink, and be merry" (Luke 12:19), but we know in the back of our minds, that it all could end tomorrow – or today.

This possibility has the effect of keeping the pressure on, especially as we grow older. Since I can't do everything, what should I choose to do? One thing that the Gospel makes very clear is what we should not do and that is to waste our time accumulating material possessions. Despite the long tradition of burying Pharaohs, Kings, and Emperors with their chariots, gold, and even their slaves, the fact remains that worldly possessions are of no use to us when we die. As Alma told his son, Corianton:

Seek not after riches nor the vain things of this world; for behold, you cannot carry them with you. (Alma 39:14.)

Perhaps this is what the universe is like – endless distractions and details to take care of on an ongoing basis. Perhaps God wants us to learn how to handle all these details and still move forward on important projects. I believe the challenge of this life is to keep sight of the big picture while still mired in the details of daily life.

Creating worlds of our own, and preparing them for life, is probably similar to tending to a large complex garden. It is necessary to attend to the details. Our Father knows this. The basics are essential: preparing the ground, planting, watering, feeding, pruning, and weeding. Complexity grows from simplicity. And beauty is manifest in diversity. God's spirit "brooded" upon the face of the waters (Abraham 4:2). The Creation was a long, slow process. Eventually God was able to pronounce His creation "good" (Moses 3:2).

Does your spirit "brood" upon the face of your life? Will you eventually be able to pronounce it "good?" Do you plant good seed in your heart? Do you feed and water your spirit? Does your life need weeding? And, in addition to the daily tending of your garden, what is your larger goal? God didn't create the world for its own sake. He created it as a part of a plan for His children. Accordingly, we need to keep the big picture in mind as we live each day. Even attending church meetings is not an end in itself. We are supposed to be gaining greater light and knowledge (Abraham 1:2). After all, according to Joseph Smith "The glory of God is intelligence" (D&C 93:36), and "Man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge." (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p.217).

We must learn to challenge the inertia caused by the needs of our bodies. If we just follow our natural instincts, the book does not get written, the symphony is never composed, the painting is left undone, the bar is never raised. Excellence is only achieved by those who sacrifice time, ease, and comfort for their pursuit. If we focus our entire life on meeting the needs of the flesh, however demanding they may be, we miss the bigger picture God wants us to see and we waste the time we have been given here on the Earth.

Consider the purpose of the Fast. For 24 hours each month we Mormons are encouraged to forgo food and water in favor of prayer and meditation. It is a clear example of placing spiritual growth ahead of physical hunger on a regular basis. At question is whether one has the faith to undertake the effort and the spiritual strength to see it through. I would suggest that this one religious exercise alone might be a fairly reliable indicator of the degree of one's spiritual development.

We were born into a physical world in order that we might learn mastery over it – not so that the physical world could gain mastery over us. Yet, the material world is so pervasive, so overwhelming, so solid, so "real," it is easy to forget that the spiritual world is our true inheritance and the only lasting reality. Just as the eternal spirit body animates, or gives life to, the human physical body, the entire physical world was created spiritually before it was created physically, and it is the spiritual creation that "animates," or gives form and purpose to, the entire physical creation.

Only the Church of Jesus Christ, as restored through Joseph Smith, can connect us to the Eternal worlds. Only the Gospel can teach us of our heritage among the Gods. Only revelation through inspired prophets can give us a glimpse of the reality beyond this limited, temporary, mortal sphere. In this world, only the Latter-day Saints have the slightest idea about what is really going on, what is the purpose of life, what is God really like... and even we know so very little.

However, even the limited knowledge we do have comes with responsibilities. The Book of Mormon says:

But wo unto him that has the law given, yea, that has all the commandments of God, like unto us, and that transgresseth them, and that wasteth the days of his probation, for awful is his state! (2 Nephi 9:27.)

We all have reasons for our choices and behaviors. Are they good enough? Really? I stopped wearing my temple garments because... I don't attend church regularly because... I don't follow the Word of Wisdom because... I have doubts about the Book of Mormon because...

At the point of weakness, at the moment of trial, do we exercise our faith? Or do we do the comfortable thing? Are we in charge of our lives? Or are our lives determined by habit, ritual, routine, custom, and comfort? Or, even worse, are our choices determined by vanity, pride, selfishness, venality, or perversity?

Sometimes in our lives it seems all we can do is just get along, try to survive, try to make ends meet, try to keep things together. We have all had times of difficulty, emotional stress, financial limitations, family crisis, personal struggle... During those times, we often find it easy to seek the Lord's comfort and counsel. It has been my experience that both the comfort and the counsel are freely available and generously given if sought for.

The challenge comes, I believe, when we are *not* struggling, when money is not a problem, when the family is fine, when we are healthy and things are going well. It is one thing to rise above personal tribulation. It is another thing again to rise above personal comfort. It may well be that when everything in one's life seems to be at its best that one is being tested the most. Nephi warned us about the dangers of being too comfortable.

And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell. (2 Nephi 28:21.)

The Second Law of Thermodynamics tells us that if we just let things go, the Universe will wind down and eventually die. Possibly the most dramatic and amazing act of Free Will in the scriptures is when God defies the law of entropy, commands the elements with power, and says "Let There Be Light!" This act demonstrates that intelligent, organized, creative will can reverse the natural slow death of the Universe.

On a personal level, Jesus taught all of us, during the Sermon on the Mount, to overcome the entropy of our own lives. He said:

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16.)

I think the great enemy is fear. The deliberate exercise of Free Will, by very definition, will jerk you right out of your comfort zone. It will subject you to criticism and misunderstanding, and it will put you firmly and clearly responsible for your own choices. There is nowhere to hide and no one else to blame.

A good example from the scriptures on how to accept responsibility comes from Father Adam. At first he points to Eve and says, “She gave me of the fruit of the tree...” It appears that he may be about to pass the blame, but it turns out he was merely describing a sequence of events. He takes full responsibility for his choice as he finishes the sentence, “...and I did eat” (Moses 4:18).

Do we dare to take such a level of personal responsibility? Knowing what we know, does it make sense to do less? Determinism, lethargy, laziness, conformity, the path of least resistance, is the path to death. The path to life is the conscious, deliberate, righteous, exercise of Free Will. We should be spending our time “anxiously engaged” in good causes. We should be doing “many things” which “bring to pass much righteousness” (D&C 58:27). It’s really the only intelligent choice.