


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Evil and embodiment: towards a Latter-day Saint non-identity theodicy

Derek Christian Haderlie and Taylor-Grey Edward Miller 

Department of Philosophy, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA

Corresponding author: Taylor-Grey Edward Miller; Email: taylor-grey_miller@byu.edu

(Received 12 July 2023; revised 29 November 2023; accepted 30 November 2023)

Abstract

We offer an account of the metaphysics of persons rooted in Latter-day Saint scripture that vindicates the essentiality of origins. We then give theological support for the claim that prospects for the success of God's soul making project are bound up in God creating particular persons. We observe that these persons would not have existed were it not for the occurrence of a variety of evils (of even the worst kinds), and we conclude that Latter-day saint theology has the resources to endorse a strong soul-making non-identity theodicy. We then introduce two complications for this account rooted in the problem of horrendous evils. First, horrendous evils threaten to undermine our confidence that God is good to each created person within the context of their life. And second, horrendous evils raise concerns about the value of persons whose existence depends on the occurrence of those evils. We may wonder whether those whose existence depends on the occurrence of horrendous evils are valuable enough to motivate God's allowance of those evils. We show that by attending to important structural features of a post-mortem, pre-eschatological state called the spirit world, Latter-day Saints can ameliorate these concerns about horrendous evils.

Keywords: problem of evil; non-identity; theodicy; Latter-day Saints; soul-making

Introduction

The long-standing Latter-day Saint approach to theodicy involves revising, in some strong degree, the attribution of omnipotence to God. In fact, the dominant approach, advanced by Latter-day Saint philosophers and theologians, can be understood as a strengthening of the modal force of Plantinga's trans-world depravity thesis. Rather than it being merely possible that every created individual sometimes freely wills the bad, Latter-day Saint philosophers and theologians have interpreted Joseph Smith as insisting that necessarily, every created individual sometimes freely wills the bad.¹ This is because we are to understand the natures of the individuals God creates as intrinsically free, disposed to do some evil, and crucially outside God's power to create.²

In this article we aim to expand the explanatory resources available to Latter-day Saints in the course of addressing the problem of evil by drawing on a different (although we believe complementary) set of theological considerations. In particular, we will argue that a wide range of Latter-day Saint theological sources can underwrite a strong version of a soul-making, non-identity theodicy. We argue that Latter-day Saint scripture and

tradition supports both that God's creative choices are shaped by a divine view of what is most conducive to the moral and spiritual development of the individuals God creates, and that those creative choices are shaped by God's desire to produce loving union with those particular individuals. However, those whom God creates could not have been brought into existence without God's policy of evil and suffering allowance.³ Had God acted to prevent certain kinds of evil, the resulting individuals would be different from (or non-identical to) any individuals God prefers to seek loving union with, namely those that resulted from permitting the evil's occurrence. This combination of views demands that the causal history of the world can't have been *very* different than it actually is in order for God's soul-making project to succeed in the ways that God desires. Any evil then that contributes to the unfolding of history in a way consonant with God's preferences about who to bring into existence can be accounted for, even evils of the very worst kind.

In the first section of our article, we offer an account of the metaphysics of persons rooted in Latter-day saint scripture that vindicates the essentiality of origins. Having vindicated the essentiality of origins, we give scriptural support for the claim that prospects for the success of God's soul making project are bound up in God creating particular persons. We observe that these persons would not have existed were it not for the occurrence of a variety of evils (of even the worst kinds), and we conclude that Latter-day Saint theology has the resources to endorse a strong soul-making non-identity theodicy.

In the second section of the article, we introduce two complications for this account rooted in the problem of horrendous evils. First, horrendous evils threaten to undermine our confidence that God is good to each created person within the context of their life. And second, horrendous evils raise concerns about the value of persons whose existence depends on the occurrence of those evils. We may wonder whether those whose existence depends on the occurrence of horrendous evils are valuable enough to motivate God's allowance of those evils. We take up these concerns and resolve them in the following two sections by drawing attention to distinctive aspects of Latter-day Saint eschatology. We argue that if we attend to important structural features of a post-mortem, pre-eschatological state called the spirit world, Latter-day Saints can ameliorate these concerns about horrendous evils.

Evil, embodiment, and the metaphysics of souls

On the Latter-day Saint view, what are now human persons existed (in some respect) as persons prior to their earthly embodiments. These are standardly referred to as *spirits*.⁴ Importantly, spirits are distinct from *souls*. Souls, according to Latter-day Saint scripture, are fusions of spirits and bodies (or the matter constituting a body).

D&C 88:15: 'And the spirit and the body are the soul of man.'

Abraham 5:7: 'And the Gods formed man from the dust of the ground, and took his spirit (that is, the man's spirit), and put it into him; and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.'⁵

Thus, embodying a spirit yields a soul. This allows us to individuate souls on the basis of their component parts. A difference in either spirit or body will result in a different fusion of spirit and body, and thus a different soul. So, on the Latter-day Saint view, it is a pre-condition of God making *you* (a particular soul) that God embody your spirit in the particular physical circumstances that God as a matter of fact has embodied you. After all, differences in which sperm fertilizes which egg yields a different body, and so a different soul (and so not you).⁶

Souls, in the sense described above, have a distinctive kind of value. Latter-day Saint scripture explicitly affirms, for example, that God structures God's own existence and planning around the creation and development of souls.⁷ Given that God values souls in the profound way that God values them, we might ask which souls (of all the possible souls) in particular God desires to make. God desires to make the souls that are appropriate to achieving God's developmental ends for the spirits so embodied. So, each created soul constitutes what we call a *suitable embodiment*.

Suitable Embodiment: an embodiment of a spirit appropriate to achieving God's developmental ends for that very spirit.

While it is quite plausible that for many spirits a range of embodiments may be sufficiently suitable, Latter-day Saint scripture is clear that for certain spirits, God has extremely specific plans for their embodiments. Latter-day Saint theology is shot through with foreordination claims. Foreordination claims each have the following force. Where x ranges over souls:

Foreordination: if x is foreordained to ϕ , God plans for the world to be such that x can ϕ .

It's important to emphasize that the above principle only licenses an inference to a practical *possibility* rather than an inevitability. So, being foreordained to ϕ only commits one to it being practically possible for that soul to ϕ . A putative foreordination claim then will license the following pattern of reasoning. God can't have made the world to be such that any particular soul foreordained to some end, can achieve those ends without ensuring that *that very soul* be among the set of actual souls. We then can read from putative foreordination claims facts about divine preferences motivating the highly specific circumstances of embodiment yielding those particular souls. This can be unpacked a bit more clearly by surveying a range of characteristic examples. We focus on three cases in particular, though there are many more. The cases of present interest will be Abraham, Jesus Christ, and Joseph Smith, since these souls each play an important theological role. Concerning Abraham, we find scriptures like the following:

Abraham 3:23: '[God] stood among those that were spirits and saw that they were good; and he said unto me, Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born.'

Concerning Jesus Christ, we find the following:

1 Peter 1:19-20: 'But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.'

Moses 5:57: 'For they would not hearken unto his voice, nor believe on his Only Begotten Son, even him whom he declared should come *in the meridian of time*, who was prepared from before the foundation of the world.' (emphasis ours)

Foreordination claims concerning Christ abound and these underscore the significance of the genealogy of Jesus. The genealogy of Jesus is essential to the realization of his actual material origins, which as we've seen are particularly significant to his status as *saviour* and *redeemer*. After all, he is to come in the *meridian of time* and that is a particular time, the time of his actual birth. So, if Christ is foreordained to various ends – with all

that they entail – the world has to be such that Christ (here now understood as a particular soul) exists.

Concerning Joseph Smith, there are explicit claims made about God planning to bring him into existence in the specific circumstances in which he as a matter of fact was. One particularly clear and representative expression of this is found in the Discourses of Brigham Young. Brigham Young (1925) states:

It was decreed in the counsels of eternity, long before the foundations of the earth were laid, that he, Joseph Smith, should be the man, in the last dispensation of this world, to bring forth the word of God to the people, and receive the fulness of the keys and power of the Priesthood of the Son of God.

The Lord had his eyes upon him, and upon his father, and upon his father's father, and upon their progenitors clear back to Abraham, and from Abraham to the flood, from the flood to Enoch, and from Enoch to Adam. He has watched that family and that blood as it has circulated from its fountain to the birth of that man. He was fore-ordained in eternity to preside over this last dispensation. (Young 1925, 108)⁸

What the examples of Abraham, Christ, and Joseph Smith illustrate, is that in Latter-day Saint theology material origins have a central kind of theological significance. In having this central significance, they introduce substantive constraints on the unfolding of history. The causal history of the world can't have been *very* different than it actually is, else the preconditions for the existence of the various souls (e.g. Abraham, Jesus, and Joseph Smith) God has foreordained to certain ends could not be met. If the history of the world can't have been *very* different than it actually is in order for God's soul-making aims to be appropriately served, then Latter-day Saint theology is well positioned to account for a vast range of evils. Any kind of evil or suffering, the occurrence of which contributes to the causal trajectory of the world resulting in *you*, has an immediate kind of justification. God desires to make you a particular soul. Intervening to prevent the evils that causally contribute to the realization of your material origins undermines the realization of (1) what God most profoundly values and (2) what is most suitable for your soul-making journey.

To illustrate the force of this kind of explanation, consider again the genealogy of Jesus. Per the biblical narrative, Christ descends from David through Solomon.⁹ But the transition from David to Solomon is fraught with evil. David initiated a series of events that led to Bathsheba's betrothal to himself, an event that played a very important role in the realization of Solomon's material origins, but one that was bound up in a variety of pernicious moral evils.¹⁰ But Christ's foreordained existence puts constraints on the unfolding of history. The biblically recounted narrative can't have been very different than it actually was, else Solomon – and thereby Christ – wouldn't have come into existence. We do, however, think it is plausible that Solomon could have come into existence without requiring David's moral evil. For all we know, there is a world where Uriah dies and David marries Bathsheba without the problematic subterfuge and conspiracy. But since the unfolding of history fails to *undermine* God's preferences with respect to which souls come into existence, God can tolerate such evil and suffering. This highlights the fact that, on the present approach, whether an act threatens God's soul-making project by jeopardizing particular embodiments partly determines God's policy of evil prevention.¹¹

This example also brings out an important limitation on such an approach to explaining evil. Explanations will only be on offer so long as there are future souls God has foreordained to certain ends. If, as it were, Christ was the last soul God foreordained to any ends, then his existence would be the last interesting constraint on the unfolding of history, and so dramatically limit the account's prospects for accommodating evil.

We've seen above compelling reason to think that the Latter-day Saint tradition acknowledges specific divine preferences surrounding Joseph Smith. That gets us much more recent constraints on the unfolding of history. But are there reasonable grounds for thinking that foreordination claims can be usefully projected into the future? After all, what we really want to be able to say is what we've said above: that any kind of evil or suffering, the occurrence of which contributes to the causal trajectory of the world resulting in you, is rooted in divine preferences concerning your spirit's actual embodiment.

Reasonable grounds abound. D&C 138 explicitly contains the language of certain spirits having their embodiments reserved for the present time.

D&C 138:53, 55–56: The Prophet Joseph Smith, and my father, Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and other choice spirits who were reserved to come forth in the fulness of times to take part in laying the foundations of the great Latter-day work . . . I observed that they were also among the noble and great ones who were chosen in the beginning to be rulers in the Church of God even before they were born, they, with many others, received their first lessons in the world of spirits and were prepared to come forth in the due time of the Lord to labour in his vineyard for the salvation of the souls of men. (Emphasis ours)

This exact language is frequently deployed in the context of addresses to the church by what the tradition takes to be prophetic (and so theologically authoritative) leaders. See for example Ezra Taft Benson's (1977) address to the then youth of the church:

I want to talk to you, the young people of the Church, frankly and honestly . . . You are not just ordinary young men and young women. You are choice spirits, many of you having been held back in reserve . . . to come forth in this day, at this time, when the temptations, responsibilities, and opportunities are the very greatest.

As recent as 2018 we find Russell M. Nelson again addressing the youth of the church claiming: 'My dear extraordinary youth, you were sent to earth at this precise time, the most crucial time in the history of the world, to help gather Israel' (Nelson 2018). Why would a spirit be held in reserve to be embodied in a particular time and for a particular purpose? Because doing so produces certain souls; souls whose existence plays an important role in the broad soul-making project God undertakes with respect to humankind. A divine preference for embodying a spirit in certain circumstances, is (given the identity criteria for souls we enumerated above) just a preference to bring a certain soul into existence. This is corroborated by an important Latter-day Saint religious practice, namely receiving a patriarchal blessing, which is available to every member of the church. Patriarchal blessings frequently contain claims about what the individuals who receive them were foreordained to do.¹² All this taken together, among other things, motivates the following claim found on the official website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: 'The doctrine of foreordination applies to all members of the Church, not just to the Savior and His prophets.'¹³ So, it is quite reasonable to think that very many presently existing and yet to exist souls are foreordained to various ends, and so introduce substantive constraints on the present unfolding of history. We conclude that Latter-day Saint theology is well positioned to maintain that the causal history of the world can't have been very different than it actually is (or will be) in order for God's soul-making project to succeed in the ways that God desires, and partly accounts for God's policy of permitting various kinds of evil and suffering. Thus, Latter-day Saints can endorse a robust version of a soul-making non-identity theodicy.

Explanatory goods and explanatory woes of non-identity theodicies

Non-identity theodicies (unlike almost any other approach) are well positioned to account for even the worst kinds of evil. Any evil, even those of the worst kind, can play an essential role in realizing the origins of some soul God desires to create; even horrendous evil. We follow Adams in characterizing horrendous evils as morally unproductive life-ruining evils (Adams 2009, ch. 3). Non-Identity approaches can point out that horrendous evils play a doubly significant role. Central to God's soul-making project is God's interest in pursuing loving union with each particular soul. So, the non-identity theorist can maintain (1) that horrendous evil contributes to realizing a world where your soul is a candidate for God to love in the ways God desires to love, and (2) horrendous evils contribute to the realization of the best possible conditions for that love to be manifest. As Vitale (2020, 200) observes 'love in its preeminent form includes meaning-makers being willing to risk their whole selves for one another'. And a world with the possibility of horrendous evils (hereafter horrors) is an essential precondition for such a world.¹⁴ So, with respect to even horrors, a non-identity theodicy can account for why they occur, as well as why God might sometimes intervene to prevent a horror, but sometimes not. The distinctive value of the particular souls God desires to love and develop shapes God's decisions to intervene or not.

What's less obvious, is whether non-identity solutions can adequately address what (we agree with Adams is) the deepest concern about horrors. Adams claims that an adequate solution to the problem of horrors should:

offer a (logically possible) scenario in which God is *good* to each created person, by ensuring each a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole, and by defeating his/her participation in horrors within the context, not merely of the world as a whole, but of that individual's life. (Adams 2009, 55)¹⁵

This becomes particularly pressing as a concern for Latter-day Saints. Latter-day Saints hold that in the eschaton, God distributes divine goods on the basis of the soul's eschatological preferences.¹⁶ Souls' eschatological preferences are deeply shaped by the kinds of experiences they undergo. Horrors pose an interesting kind of risk on such a picture. They may cause a soul to desire disunity rather than unity with God. Characteristic examples include cases of religious trauma; cases like the following (inspired by true events) reported in Panchuk (2018):

A young child is repeatedly and brutally beaten by her Christian parents. She is told that since God commanded the Israelites to stone their rebellious children, anything they do to her short of that is divinely approved and morally deserved. And she believes them. One night, they lock her out of the house as punishment for some misdeed. Sitting alone, bruised and bleeding, gazing at the stars, the girl has an overwhelming sense of the presence of God – a presence utterly terrifying because she perceives it to be of a being who delights in her suffering. (Panchuk 2018, 514)

Anyone who regarded God as a being who 'delighted in their suffering' would, we take it, desire eschatological goods that included separation from God.

Horrors may also result in a diminished capacity to make meaning for the subject of the horror. Characteristic cases include the kinds of horrors described by Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and cases of torture that have the effect of so degrading the personality and dignity of the individual that they no longer even conceive of themselves as human in important respects.¹⁷ Horrors, thus, threaten to undermine God's ability to

make good on the soul-making project he initiates by having given them a *suitable embodiment*. In fact, they threaten to undermine the plausibility of them even having been suitably embodied. So, for the Latter-day Saints, horrors pose two kinds of eschatological risks.

- (1) They threaten to form strong preferences for disunity with God.
- (2) They threaten to debilitate the soul to be made in the ways that would enable them to enter into the kind of loving union God desires for them.

Thus, the occurrence of such horrors appears to leave unaddressed Adams's constraint. What could be worse for *that soul* than to end up either strongly preferring eternal disunity or failing to be able to make the meaning necessary to achieve that unity?

We wish to raise one more difficulty before proceeding. In addition to wondering whether the life of a horror participant is a great good to them, those whose lives depend essentially on the occurrence of various horrors may wonder whether their lives are valuable enough to warrant God's staying of hand. The descendant of holocaust survivors may well wonder whether their existence was really worth the holocaust, and how God could sensibly justify these horrors by appeal to the value of their existence. So, a full view should aim to address the question:

- (3) 'Was my existence really worth the horror?'

We want to emphasize that this is a concern about the source of value that the non-identity solution takes to be the source of moral justification for God's policy of allowing evil and suffering. It is importantly different from the question of whether one can or ought to be grateful (or hold other attitudes) towards the history of events that transpired in the course of bringing them into existence.¹⁸ So, for the present discussion, we raise as a concern for Latter-day Saint theology the need to justify a soul's value in such a way that one might plausibly respond 'yes' to (3) presented above. We turn to addressing each of these concerns in the next section.

Life in the Latter-day Saint afterlife

Latter-day Saints have a distinctive kind of eschatological view. Whereas on traditional Christian theology, death results in transition to one's eternal afterlife state, according to Latter-day Saint theology death results in a transition to a transitory afterlife state. Latter-day Saint scripture refers to this transitory state as 'the spirit world'.¹⁹ The spirit world has interesting features relevant to addressing the concerns raised above. First, those who transition via death to the spirit world are taken to have important kinds of psychological continuity with their pre-deceased selves. Among other things, death itself won't typically result in an interesting shift in eschatological preferences (let alone other sorts of attitudes we held while embodied).²⁰ However, it will present conditions suitable for the alteration of those preferences.

According to Latter-day Saint scripture, when Christ died, he (like us) transitioned to the spirit world, and also established an organization whose aim was the therapeutic rehabilitation of the spirits who died in disunity with him. For example, D&C 138 reports a vision of Joseph F. Smith the content of which was Christ's establishment of this organization:

But behold from among the righteous, he organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth

and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness, even to all the spirits of men; and thus was the gospel preached to the dead. And the chosen messengers went forth to declare the acceptable day of the Lord and proclaim liberty to the captives who were bound. (D&C 138:30–31)

A hope of therapeutic rehabilitation for the spirits who are not yet in union with Christ, we argue, entails that those spirits in the spirit world, regardless of how they were embodied, have the prospects of forming better eschatological preferences. But how? What features would need to characterize conditions in the spirit world more generally to support this kind of rehabilitative optimism? We identify three such conditions:

- (1) Improved epistemic conditions
- (2) Preservation of certain kinds of divine distance
- (3) Access to the past and present unfolding of history

Improved epistemic conditions are essential if the kinds of evil born of bad theology (or no theology) are to be addressed. If God truly is a being of love and perfection, someone who experiences God as a being who delights in their suffering cannot come to desire union with God without better information about the kind of being God really is – information that is contextualized in a way not subject to pernicious theological manipulation. But more than just better information is needed. One’s cognitive capacities must be well positioned to take up that information. This may even demand cognitive resources comparatively better than our present cognitive capacities, given the ongoing struggle our human faculties confront in reckoning with challenging but theologically significant considerations.

Preservation of certain kinds of divine distance are essential if the spirit world is to be therapeutic. God cannot reconcile with an individual who is hostile to union with him, so long as they resent God. It seems to us that what God can do to help the individual come to see God as good (and thereby desire union with him) rather than an appropriate object of resentment is to not force that individual into his presence. By sending that individual to a place where certain distance is preserved, God demonstrates his sensitivity to their preferences, and thereby engenders a kind of goodness in them.

Access to the past and present unfolding of history is essential if spirits are to be able to change preferences in light of the reasons why God permitted the relevant kinds of evil and suffering in the first place. Suppose God permitted a horror because it was essential to realizing the material origins of a soul God preferred to exist. By confronting their suffering in a context of what God values and how that constrains God’s policy of intervention, spirits come to see their relationship with God, not merely in light of the scope of God’s plan for them, but in the light of the global scope of God’s relationship with humanity.

Not only do these conditions seem essential for the prospects of eschatological preference shifts, but they also seem to generate fertile grounds for making meaning out of the kinds of evil and suffering spirits undergo while embodied. By having significantly improved epistemic resources – including information about the past and present unfolding of history – one can take a novel view of the significance of the events of one’s life and how that relates to God’s broader soul-making aims with humanity.²¹

So, how confident can Latter-day Saints be that life in the spirit world meets these conditions? Quite Confident. Below we present some motivations.

Improved epistemic conditions

Talk of ‘carry[ing] the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness’ and ‘proclaim [ing] liberty to the captives who were bound’ as mentioned previously in D&C 138 clearly signals improved epistemic conditions. This language draws strongly on language that Joseph Smith frequently used to designate poor informational conditions. For example, Joseph Smith says in an often-quoted sermon: ‘a man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge, for if he does not get knowledge, he will be brought into captivity . . .’²² Not only is the availability of information relevant to prospects for spiritual rehabilitation improved, so are spirit’s capacities to uptake that information. Consider the following representative claims from Brigham Young and Orson Pratt:

I shall not cease learning while I live, nor when I arrive in the spirit world; but shall there learn with greater facility. (JD 8:6)

. . . we shall be freed, in the next world, in a great measure, from these narrow, contracted methods of thinking . . . truth, knowledge will rush in from all quarters; it will come in like the light which flows from the sun, penetrating every part, informing the spirit, and giving understanding concerning ten thousand things at the same time; and the mind will be capable of receiving and retaining all. (JD 2:235)

Preservation of certain (crucial) kinds of divine distance

Latter-day Saint scripture makes it clear that when Christ visits the spirit world, he does not personally minister to those disunited with him, on account of their disunity, but instead ministers indirectly through servants deputized to do so on Christ’s behalf.

D&C 138:37: ‘That they might carry the message of redemption unto all the dead, unto whom [Christ] could not go personally . . .’

Access to the past and present unfolding of history

In remarks featured in an official church instruction manual, Brigham Young states:

[Those in the spirit world] move with ease and like lightning . . . If we want to behold Jerusalem as it was in the days of the Savior; or if we want to see the Garden of Eden as it was when created, there we are, and we see it as it existed spiritually, for it was created first spiritually and then temporally, and spiritually it still remains. And when there we may behold the earth as at the dawn of creation, or we may visit any city we please that exists upon its surface. If we wish to understand how they are living here on these western islands, or in China, we are there; in fact, we are like the light of the morning . . . When we pass into the spirit world, we shall possess a measure of this power. (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, 380)

Since various central aspects of soul-making are essential to the formation of good eschatological preferences, we can be confident that there must be meaning-making opportunities available to spirits in the spirit world. Given that spirits can make meaning in the spirit world, it opens up interesting possibilities for thinking about what kinds of embodiments are suitable embodiments. A suitable embodiment need not be appropriate to achieving God’s soul-making ends for that very spirit *while in the flesh*. In fact, this view opens up horizons in ‘the context of that individual’s life’ for them to make meaning out of the horrors they undergo. After all, one special kind of soul-making opportunity that

becomes available in the spirit world is *reckoning with a horrific embodiment*. And it need not be mystery, but might be wisdom in God for that spirit to become such a soul, since the spirit world is a place where God might most productively pursue his soul-making project for that spirit. We conclude that Latter-day Saint theology can muster up to even Adam's stringent demands on an adequate solution to the problem of horrors.

Lingering concerns about the value of soul

We've shown that there are reasons to be optimistic that the lives of horror participants can be a great good to them. We now turn to the final concern that we will take up at present. Those whose lives depend essentially on the occurrence of various horrors may wonder whether their lives are valuable enough to warrant God's staying of hand. This section aims to address the following question such an individual may raise:

(3) 'Was my existence really worth the horror?'

There are various ways that one might try and vindicate a 'yes' answer to (3). One may try to articulate various principles that allow for the comparative assessment of the value of souls. On such a view, one may become confident that a soul's existence was worth the horror if the soul carries sufficient off-setting value, perhaps by virtue of their life containing or making for more of what makes life worth living.²³ This may go some of the way towards a general solution, but we are sceptical that it could have anything like a fully general appeal. A view like this would, in the present theological context, naturally try to muster resources to acknowledge the comparatively greater value of Jesus Christ's existence. But other kinds of comparisons are difficult, if not impossible, to make.²⁴ Perhaps the existence of Jesus is so valuable that we can say that Solomon's existence was worth the horror. But what about your life or the life of the descendants of the holocaust survivors? We think there is reason to be sceptical that many such lives can fare well by way of any plausible principles of comparative value.

Another approach is to appeal to various features underwriting the permissibility of human procreation in even horrific circumstances. If, as we may be inclined to think, it is within the moral rights of parents to procreate in such circumstances, we may try to identify what conditions are in place that explain why it is permissible for those parents to procreate. For example, we might point to the ways in which procreating constitutes a good for the parents (perhaps by introducing the goods of caring for another human life), or that procreating constitutes a broader kind of public good, or that it would produce a life that regarded it as a great good to them.²⁵ We may then take these conditions underwriting the permissibility of procreation and argue that they project as conditions that underwrite the permissibility of divine creation. If a human life is valuable enough for their parents to bring it into existence, then it is valuable enough for God to bring it into existence, and so support a verdict that their existence was worth the horrors.²⁶ This approach is complicated by various philosophical pressures to limit the range of permissible procreative acts as well as difficulty in motivating the divine projectability of the sorts of reasons one might invoke to justify human procreative acts.²⁷

We plan to pursue neither of these approaches. Instead, we try to provide theological grounds for optimism that the life of one whose conditions of existence are bound up in the occurrence of horrendous evils has a life worth those evils. A few theological observations. Souls are valuable to God. This is a banal observation, but what's striking in Latter-day Saint scripture is the sort of evidence God provides for why we should take ourselves to have the kind of superlative value God takes us to have. Consider D&C 18:10–13,

Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God; For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him. And he hath risen again from the dead, that he might bring all men unto him, on conditions of repentance. And how great is his joy in the soul that repenteth!

What is striking here is that Christ's suffering 'death in the flesh', Christ's suffering 'the pain of all men' is presented as a reason to accept that the worth of souls is great in God's view. So, D&C seems to underwrite the following kind of value principle:

Redemption-to-Creation: If a life is valuable enough for God to redeem, it is valuable enough for God to create.

On this view, we should calibrate our judgements about the value of any particular soul in light of the fact that the scope of Christ's redemption includes that soul. Why should the fact that Christ's redemption includes every actually existing (and yet to exist) soul move us to see their value as being such that their existence is worth the horrors? Because of how costly Christ's redemption of humanity was.

Adams observes forcefully that Christ's entrance into human history is fraught with participation in horrors. First, Christ was a victim of horrors. His torture and crucifixion were both gratuitously cruel and given the religious context in which it occurred inhibited the recognition of it as a messianic act (Adams 2006, 69). Second, Christ's birth is the occasion for a variety of horrors including Herod's infanticide (Adams 2006, 69). Third, Christ's ministry dissolved deeply rooted religious structures that played a crucial role in the meaning-making of the Jewish people (Adams 2006, 69–70). Fourth, Christ's ministry had the effect of turning those who conceived of themselves as most committed to preparing the way for the Messiah (e.g. the pharisees and even Judas) into its most dangerous threats, leading to what she calls '*prima facie* ruinous levels of self-betrayal' (Adams 2006, 70). And lastly, Christ's use of Roman goods and teachings concerning Rome threaten complicity in the pervasive horrors the empire wrought (Adams 2006, 71).

We are the objects of redemption, and God doesn't perform acts that are not worth doing. What God offers, as an explanation of God's motivation to perform those redemptive acts, is our worth. But performing those redemptive acts requires that God become embodied in a way that both demands the occurrence of a wide range of horrors and inevitably occasions the occurrence of still more. God takes our value to be such that God sees God's embodied existence as worth the horrors. This provides a ground of hope that our lives are also worth the horrors; a hope rooted in the urgency of deferring to the divinely articulated perspective (in both word and deed) of human value.

Conclusion

The Problem of Evil, is among other things, a problem for faith; what grounds can there be for maintaining a confidence in the goodness of God in the face of such pervasive and profound evil. In the face of a concern for faith, one yearns for a reason rooted in divine testimony, in revelation, rather than in the furthest reaches of modal space. We have found compelling reason rooted in the Latter-day Saint revelatory tradition for thinking that grounds for faith can be preserved even in the face of the most profound kinds of evil; without revising in any capacity any core attribution of perfection to God.

By combining the traditional virtues of a soul-making non-identity theodicy with a transitory, therapeutic pre-eschatological afterlife state, Latter-day Saints can adequately address the deepest forms of evil and suffering that souls encounter. Moreover, by

acknowledging the value of souls reflected in the costly divine redemption of those souls, we find grounds for optimism that any soul whose existence depends on the occurrence of horrors, has sufficient worth to justify bringing them into existence.

Acknowledgements. Many thanks to the Global Philosophy of Religion Project for accepting an earlier version of this project for presentation at their ‘The Problem of Evil and Suffering’ Conference, and to the conference participants whose constructive feedback helped improve this manuscript. Thanks also to our colleagues at BYU as well as three anonymous referees at *Religious Studies* whose comments improved the manuscript as well.

Author contributions. This article is the product of full and equal collaboration between its authors; the order of authorship is alphabetical.

Notes

1. See e.g. Paulsen (2000) for the canonical presentation of such an argument, and McLaughlan (2015) for discussion of this approach to theodicy in Latter-day Saint thought.
2. This view has its roots in Joseph Smith’s King Follett discourse and is importantly developed in Roberts (1903). For excellent discussion of the theological place of the King Follett discourse in the broader Latter-day Saint theological landscape, see Faulconer and Morrison (2021).
3. This approach to theodicy has its roots in Leibniz, but see e.g. Adams (1979), and Hasker (1981) for contemporary arguments to this effect. See also Vitale (2020) for a more recent, forceful, and comprehensive defence of this approach.
4. Scriptural uses of the term ‘spirit’ to designate pre-embodied persons include Moses 3:4–9, Abraham 3:23.
5. It is worth observing that in various places the term ‘soul’ is used to designate spirits, but all we aim to point out here is the scriptural distinction between a pre-embodied person and that which results from fusing it with various bits of matter.
6. For arguments in favour of the essentiality of origins see Kripke (1980), and more recently Rohrbaugh & deRosset (2004).
7. See e.g. D&C [18:10–18], and Moses [1:39] for some typically clear scriptural expressions of this view.
8. Scriptural expressions of this sentiment can be found respectively in 2 Nephi 3:6–15, Moses 1:40–41, and perhaps most forcefully in D&C 86:8–11. For other contemporary expressions of this sentiment by ecclesiastical authorities, see also JD 21:316 and JD 24:187. Here we adopt the convention of using JD as an abbreviation for *Journal of Discourses* (Watt et al. 1851–1886).
9. See e.g. Matthew 1:6.
10. See 2 Samuel 11 and 12.
11. This should be of particular interest to Latter-day Saint readers since it is often thought that in so arranging his marriage to Bathsheba David fell from his exaltation (see D&C 132:29). But as we’ve seen above, there is no reason to think that this evil must have occurred. Only that given its compatibility with realizing Solomon’s origins, such an evil act could be tolerated. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing us to make this point clear as well as to draw attention to the eschatological significance of David’s actions in a Latter-day Saint context.
12. See e.g. Marquardt (2007).
13. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/foreordination?lang=eng>.
14. See e.g. Stout (2007) and Vitale (2020) for arguments to this effect.
15. See also Adams (2006, 226).
16. See Miller and Haderlie (2020) for discussion and development of this view.
17. For a characteristically brutal (fictional case) see the case of Theon Greyjoy’s torture at the hands of Ramsay Bolton culminating in his acceptance of a new identity Reek in G. R. R. Martin’s *Dance of Dragons*.
18. Though for excellent discussion of this and related questions, see Hasker (1981) and Kahane (2019) and (2023).
19. D&C [138:16] first introduces the language of ‘spirit world’.
20. See e.g. Alma [34:34], [40: 7–14, 21], 2 Nephi [9:16] and Mormon [9:14], JD 3:362.
21. In particular, it opens up possibilities for persons to appreciate the narrative resolutions – of the sort discussed by Stump (2010) – of the evils they experience while embodied.
22. Discourse, 10 April 1842, as reported by Wilford Woodruff, in Smith (2019, 146), <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-10-april-1842-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/1>.
23. For example, Parfit’s impersonal principles. See Parfit (1984) and (2017).
24. See e.g. Bayles (1978) for compelling reasons to think such comparisons in principle cannot be made.
25. See Brighouse & Swift (2006) for discussion of ways in which it might constitute a good for the parents, and see Engster (2010) and Millum (2017) for discussion of ways in which it may constitute a public good, and for

discussion of ways in which what and how we value are bound up in the circumstances responsible for our coming into existence see Adams (1979).

26. For discussion of this kind of strategy see Woolnough (m.s.) and Vitale (2020, ch. 7).

27. See e.g. Benatar (1999), (2006) and Schiffrin (1999) for an articulation of these sorts of pressures.

References

- Adams RM (1979) Existence, self-interest, and the problem of evil. *Noûs* 13, 53–65.
- Adams MM (2006) *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Adams MM (2009) *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Bayles MD (1978) The price of life. *Ethics* 89, 20–34.
- Benatar D (1999) The unbearable lightness of bringing into being. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 16, 173–180.
- Benatar D (2006) *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Benson ET (1977) A message to the rising generation. *Ensign*, October (1977). Available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1977/10/a-message-to-the-rising-generation?lang=eng>.
- Brighthouse H and Swift A (2006) Parents' rights and the value of the family. *Ethics* 117, 80–108.
- Engster D (2010) The place of parenting within a liberal theory of justice: the private parenting model, parental licenses, or public parenting support? *Social Theory and Practice* 36, 233–262.
- Faulconer J and Morrison S (July 1, 2021) The King Follett discourse: pinnacle or peripheral? *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, 85–104. doi: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol60/iss3/8>
- Hasker W (1981) On regretting the evils of this world. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 19, 425–437.
- Kahane G (2019) History and Persons. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 99, 162–187.
- Kahane G (2023) Was evolution worth it? *Philosophical Studies* 180, 249–271.
- Kripke SA (1980) *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Marquardt MH (2007) *Early Patriarchal Blessings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Salt Lake City, UT: Smith-Pettit Foundation.
- McLaughlan JM (2015) The problem of evil in Mormon thought. In Givens TL and Barlow PL (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 276–291. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199778362.013.45>.
- Miller T-G and Haderlie D (2020) Sider's puzzle and the Mormon afterlife. *Journal of Analytic Theology* 8, 131–151.
- Millum J (2017) *The Moral Foundations of Parenthood*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nelson RM (2018) Hope of Israel. Worldwide Youth Devotional. Available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2018/06/hope-of-israel?lang=eng>.
- Panchuk M (2018) The shattered spiritual self: a philosophical exploration of religious trauma. *Res Philosophica* 95, 505–530.
- Parfit D (1984) *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parfit D (2017) Future people, the non-identity problem, and person-affecting principles. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 45, 118–157.
- Paulsen DL (2000) Joseph Smith and the problem of evil. *Brigham Young University Studies* 39, 53–65.
- Roberts BH (1903) *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts-Van Der Donck Discussion, to Which Is Added a Discourse, Jesus Christ: The Revelation of God*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News.
- Rohrbaugh G and deRosset L (2004) A new route to the necessity of origin. *Mind* 113, 705–725.
- Shiffrin SV (1999) Wrongful life, procreative responsibility, and the significance of harm. *Legal Theory* 5, 117–148.
- Smith AD (2019) *The Joseph Smith Papers Documents, Volume 9: December 1841–April 1842*. Heimbürger C and Blythe CJ (eds). Salt Lake City, UT: The Church Historian's Press.
- Stout J (2007) *The Sacred Made Visible. The Third lecture in 'A Light that Shines in Darkness: Evil Egotism, and the Sacred in Film', Stone Lectures*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary.
- Stump E (2010) *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Vitale VR (2020) *Non-Identity Theodicy: A Grace-Based Response to the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198864226.001.0001>.
- Watt GD et al. (1851–1886) *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. Liverpool: F. D. and S. W. Richards, et al. (reprint Salt Lake City: n.p., 1974).
- Woolnough DR (m.s.) Anti-natalism, pro-creation, and the problem of evil: a new fruitful dilemma.
- Young B (1925) *Discourses of Brigham Young*. Bountiful, UT: Deseret Book Company.

Cite this article: Haderlie DC, Miller T-GE (2025). Evil and embodiment: towards a Latter-day Saint non-identity theodicy. *Religious Studies* 61, 93–105. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001117>