A Critique of "The Mormon Concept of God, A Philosophical Analysis"

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The nature of deity throughout the history of philosophy has always been a subject of debate, from some of the earliest writings, philosophers and theologians have given arguments for and against the existence and nature of God. Beckwith and Parrish, in *The Mormon Concept Of God, A Philosophical Analysis*, add another page to this on-going debate with their attack of the "Mormon concept of God." In the introduction Beckwith and Parrish explain that it is their aim to show

1. that the Mormon concept of God differs radically from the classical concept of God,
2. that the Mormon concept of God contains many philosophical flaws,
3. that the classical concept of God is more consistent with the Christian Scriptures than the Mormon view. (Beckwith 1)

Another apparent aim of Beckwith and Parrish's book is the defence of the classical concept of God.

This paper will analyze the philosophical arguments and examples used by Beckwith and Parrish and will demonstrate that these arguments are not compelling enough to achieve their goals. To achieve this in an orderly fashion the structure of this paper will follow that of Beckwith and Parrish's book.

This work is offered not as an apologetic paper but rather as a critical review of Beckwith and Parrish's philosophical arguments. It will focus on the first three chapters of the book ("The Classical Concept of God, Mormon Finitistic Theism," and, "Philosophical Problems with the Mormon Concept of God"). The reason for this is that the

In the first chapter of Beckwith and Parrish's book entitled "The Classical Concept of God," they present the classical concept of God and the criticisms given by Mormons which they believe could be "damaging to classical theism" (Beckwith 7). There are ten key traits, as Beckwith and Parrish see it, to the classical concept of God.

The first of these is that God is "personal and disembodied" (Beckwith 8), meaning that God does not have a physical presence (a spirit) but God does "act," "love," "know," and "chose" (Beckwith 8). In other words, God "possesses rationality" (Beckwith 8).

The second trait of the classical God is that God is "the creator and sustainer of all contingent existence" (Beckwith 8). By this Beckwith and Parrish mean that God is "not dependent on anything else for His being God" or that "He lacks nothing" (Beckwith 9). Not only is He not dependent on anything else but everything is dependent on Him. God created everything out of nothing (ex nihilo). Beckwith and Parish point out that Blake Ostler (a defender of the Mormon concept of God) has argued that it makes no logical sense to claim that a being that lacks nothing made our world. The argument simply put says that "every positive action requires an
explanation sufficient to account for it" (Beckwith 8), and if it is assumed that the creation of world is a positive thing, then it follows that there must an "explanation sufficient to account for" why God created the world. A being that lacks nothing, Ostler argues, would not have a sufficient reason for doing such a thing. Beckwith and Parrish suggest that Ostler is confusing the meaning of sufficient in "self-sufficient" with sufficient in "sufficient reason." They go on to claim that "God's sufficient reason to create the universe is simply that He desired to do so for his own pleasure although if He had created nothing whatsoever He would have not ceased possessing the attributes of God" (Beckwith 9). The problem with this explanation is that it plays right into Ostler's argument. If God's pleasure is not dependent on whether or not God created our world then what was God's reason for doing so? The only possible answer is that God created this world on a whim. This leaves Beckwith and Parrish with a whimsical God.

Omnipotence is the third trait of Beckwith and Parrish's concept of the classical God. God is all-powerful in the sense that "God can do anything that is (1) logically possible and (2) is consistent with Him being a wholly perfect, personal, disembodied, omniscient, immutable and necessary creator" (Beckwith 10). Beckwith and Parrish claim that these are not limiting factors, they are instead "perfections... which are essential to God's nature" (Beckwith 10). However
they give no other explanations as to why these are not limiting factors (especially with regards to (2)).

The forth trait of the classical concept of God is that God is omniscient, Beckwith and Parrish explain that "the range of his [God's] knowledge is total; He knows all true propositions" (Beckwith 11). God knows everything past, present, and future, and He knows it immediately; there are no physical mediums by which God obtains his knowledge. Those who have accepted God's perfect knowledge of the future have always had a problem reconciling that trait with human freedom. Beckwith and Parrish try to brush off this ancient dilemma simply by saying that "just because something definitely will happen does not mean that it must happen" (Beckwith 13). An example of what they mean by this statement and how it would be applied to God is that I could have gone hiking yesterday rather than working on this paper, and that if I had chosen to have gone hiking, God's knowledge of what action I would take would have been different. "God," they claim, "knows what will happen because we will freely act in a certain way, not because we must act in a certain way" (Beckwith 13). All that their defence would really provides us with is apparent freedom. If God has known since I was born that I would spend yesterday working on this paper, then there was no chance at all that I would have done otherwise. If God knows that I will do such and such tomorrow then I will do such and such tomorrow, no matter how I make the decision or how free to make that decision I feel.
From the traits—omniscience, disembodiment, omnipotence, and creator and sustainer of the universe—Beckwith and Parrish claim that the fifth trait logically follows. God is, they claim, "in some sense present everywhere" (Beckwith 14), or omnipresent.

The sixth trait is that of God's immutability. Beckwith and Parrish clarify this by saying that God can be immutable and still interact with his creation and be personal. It seems that the term immutable is applied to God's moral traits and not his actions. God's immutability however may be in conflict with the seventh of God's traits, his eternal nature.

In classical theism to say that God is eternal is to say that God is outside of time and not affected or bound by it. The conflict is 'how can God be eternal—completely outside of time—and still act within time? This too is an ancient problem; the concept of a timeless being dates back to the Greeks and appears to have been picked up by early Christians. In response to these objections Beckwith and Parrish propose this answer: Since God knew even before He created the world exactly what would happen then He could have simultaneously created the world and sent forth all his actions within the world. This argument claims that God would therefore not be acting within time and therefore not be violating His eternal nature. Nicholas Wolterstorff (Himself a classical theist) in his article "God Everlasting" explains that even if one were to accept the answer that Beckwith and Parrish espouse, they would be still stuck with a God that has a time-strand.
Wolterstorff points out that "at least some of his [God's] aspects stand in temporal order-relations to each other" (Wolterstorff 202) and therefore God "is fundamentally in time" (Wolterstorff 200).

Beckwith and Parrish mention another objection that Ostler makes with regards to the classical concept of God. Ostler says that "the idea of a God who is in no place and in no time is an idea of no God" and "there is no way to distinguish Him from any other entity" (Beckwith 17). Beckwith and Parrish's answer to this objection is that "Ostler has not sufficiently demonstrated why bodily extension is a necessary condition for personal identity" (Beckwith 18).

Beckwith and Parrish have adopted one of the traditional arguments for the existence of God to demonstrate that it is possible for there to exist a eternal and disembodied entity. Their version of the traditional argument is:

1. Everything that begins to exist does so only through a cause.
2. The universe had a beginning.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.
4. There cannot exist an infinite regress of causes in time.
5. Therefore, the cause of the universe is eternal and uncaused, from which we can infer particular attributes. (Beckwith 19)

If one accepts this argument Beckwith and Parrish suggest that they could infer that God is timeless (or at least could be), that God is disembodied, and that God is personal. God is or at least could be timeless because if time did not exist before the universe was created then God was timeless, and
they, suggest still could be. As pointed out previously however, if God acts in any way at all, God has a time-strand.

Their second inference, that God is disembodied, arises from the fact that "since physical reality began with the beginning of the universe" (Beckwith 20) anything prior to that--the cause--must not have been physical. God, they say, is personal because the creation has to have been a deliberate act of a free entity. This point like the rest of the argument must be taken only as a possibility with a lot of 'ifs' attached. For example even if one accepts the argument it could be argued that the first cause was not the act of a free rational entity but rather it may have only been an accident.

The eighth trait that Beckwith and Parrish attribute to God is that God is "the source of all values and perfectly good" (Beckwith 22). All values come from God but they are not arbitrary; they come from God's very nature, God being perfectly good. God is subject to these values as He is subject to his own nature, but they are not above Him as they are apart of Him.

Beckwith and Parrish's ninth trait is that God is "able to communicate with humans" (Beckwith 23). This of course follows as a fact that God is omnipotent and would be disputed by few theists; it never the less remains a problem if one still suggests that God is timeless.

The last trait that Beckwith and Parrish propose is that God is the "necessary and only God" (Beckwith 24). By this
they indicate that they mean that God is not simply a factually necessary being, but that God is in fact the logically necessary being and the maximally greatest being.

Following the same order of traits found in chapter one, Beckwith and Parrish analyze "Mormon finitistic theism" in chapter two. Beckwith and Parrish point out in the introduction to the second chapter that because Mormonism is a religion and that its doctrines are spread out through many works it is difficult to say authoritatively exactly what its theology is.

First, God is personal in both classical and Mormon theology but, Beckwith and Parrish point out, God is not disembodied in Mormon theology. God has a "body of flesh and bones" (Beckwith 39).

Second, in contrast to the classical God who created the world out of nothing, the Mormon God is said to be the "organizer of the world... subject to the laws and principles of a beginningless universe" (Beckwith 39). Beckwith and Parrish quote Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, as saying that God "organized and reorganized" (Beckwith 39) the universe out of already existing elements. They say that here Mormon and classical theism stand in the starkest contradiction. Not only do Mormons deny the doctrine of creation out of nothing, but they also deny that God has anything to do with sustaining the universe. As far as the existence of matter and energy goes, it is totally beyond God's control. (Beckwith 40)
It is interesting to note the difference in perspective here between the classical and Mormon theist. After three quotes explaining the Mormon position that God organizes the matter and energy to create the universe, Beckwith and Parrish claim that the Mormon God has nothing to do with sustaining the universe because He did not create it ex nihilo. The Mormon theist would say that God does support the universe because without God there would only be chaos not the universe that we know. This might be rather inconsequential but it does help point out the difficulty of contrasting two theologies that are based on very different metaphysical foundations. This is a problem that shows up over and over in Beckwith and Parrish's book.

Third, the trait of omnipotence takes on a much different meaning in the Mormon tradition. Beckwith and Parrish point out that the Mormon God can do only that which is possible, which as we have just seen means that the Mormon God can not create or destroy matter; He is in fact bound by certain natural laws.

With regards to the forth trait, omniscience, Beckwith and Parrish point out that there is not a consensus within Mormonism. However because the classical view of omnipotence has already been covered, they focus on the rival view that they believe to be dominate within Mormonism. This view is that God knows all that is possible for Him to know. Because the future has not yet occurred and humans have freewill it is suggested that God can not know exactly what will happen in
the future. His Knowledge is therefore limited to the past and present.

Fifth God is "not omnipresent in being" (Beckwith 42). According to Mormon theology God has a body. Beckwith and Parrish say that "when a Mormon says that God is omnipresent He is asserting that God's influence, power, and knowledge is all-pervasive" (Beckwith 43). Omnipresence in the Mormon tradition is limited to "God's Spirit, or Influence or Power" (Beckwith 42). God's body, however, is in only one place at a time.

Sixth and seventh, God has always existed but in contrast with the immutable God of classical theology the Mormon God has not always been God but rather He achieved that status. Eighth, the Mormon God being subject to eternal principles is not the source of all values as the classical God is. God holds these values and is bound by them but they are external to Him. On the ninth trait, Beckwith and Parrish find agreement between classical theism and Mormon theism in that God can communicate with humans; the difference is in how God does so, but this is not important for our discussion.

"All of this," as Beckwith and Parrish explain, "brings us to a very important distinction between the God of the Mormons and the God of classical theism" (Beckwith 45). This distinction is that the God of classical theism is logically necessary (the tenth trait) and therefore the only God. On the other hand the Mormons' God is necessary only in the sense that He has always existed along with all of the other beings
Mormonism also proposes that there are other Gods, who also came to be Gods just as our God did, and Mormons admit that it is possible that had God had some failure in the past He may not have become God.

In the third chapter there are four arguments proposed by Beckwith and Parrish to discredit the Mormon theory of God. Of those only one deals directly with one of God's traits; the other three attack the metaphysical groundings of Mormon theology. The arguments are as follows:

1. The impossibility of an infinite series of events in the past.
2. The impossibility of an eternal progression in a beginningless series of events.
3. The impossibility of an actual infinite number of things in the material world.
4. The impossibility of achieving omniscience in time and space.

The first of these arguments is presented in this form:

1. The series of events in time is a collection formed by adding one member after another.
2. A collection formed by adding one member after another cannot be actually infinite.
3. Therefore, the series of events in time cannot be actually infinite. (Beckwith 54)

Beckwith and Parrish seem to believe that a series of events in time is similar to a box of marbles, and that we will never achieve an infinite number of marbles in time by adding them one at a time. It would appear that what this argument is actually saying is that one can not achieve a infinite number of events in a finite period of time. The time-strand is made up not only of events that have occurred one after another but
also of events that have occurred simultaneously. Events are not added like marbles; they do not occur not one at a time. You may have an infinite number of events occurring within a finite period of time. Now change that finite period of time to an infinite one, and you can easily see how an infinite number of events can occur. Ernest Nagel suggests that the idea that there must be a first cause is obscured. Nagel explains that the argument is an ancient one, and is especially effective when stated within the framework of assumptions of Aristotelian physics; and it has impressed many generations of exceptionally keen minds. The argument is nonetheless a week reed on which to rest the theistic thesis. Let us wave any question concerning the validity of a first cause.... However, if the principle is assumed, it is surely incongruous to postulate a first cause as a way of escaping from the coils of an infinite series. For even if everything must have a cause, why does not God require one for His own existence? The standard answer is that He does not need any, because He is self-caused. But if God can be self caused, why cannot the world be self-caused? On the other hand, the supposed inconceivability and absurdity of an infinite series of regressive causes will be admitted by no one who has competent familiarity with the modern mathematical analysis of infinity. (Nagel 7)

It should also be pointed out again that the classical God has not escaped time, and if He has existed forever He would also be subject to the same argument that Beckwith and Parrish propose for Mormon theism. Can one actually cross an infinite series of steps? The real question it would seem in this case would be can the elements rather then the classical God be eternal in that they have always existed and will continue to do so? Beckwith and Parrish give no reason as to why this can not be the case.
The second argument that Beckwith and Parrish present is what they call "the impossibility of an eternal progression in a beginningless series of events" (Beckwith 59). They divide this into three separate arguments. The first is "on reaching our inevitable goal" (Beckwith 60). Beckwith and Parrish suggest that "if the past series of events in time is infinite, we should have all reached our inevitable fate by now" (Beckwith 60). Beckwith and Parrish seem to have missed an important correlation in that their very next argument is "on an infinite number of Gods and an infinite number of intelligences" (Beckwith 61). In which they insist that according to Mormon theology there must be an infinite number of intelligences. If there are an infinite number of intelligences then it seem to reason that all of them could not have yet reached their fate. If there are already an infinite number of Gods who once were simply intelligences and assuming that all the intelligences did not become Gods then the infinite past would have been quite busy. The third point that they make is that there would be an "infinite number of remaining intelligences." This point would seem to be a clarification and not an argument.

The third major argument against the Mormon theology, that Beckwith and Parrish present, is "the impossibility of an actual infinite number of things in the material universe" (Beckwith 63). In this argument they attempt to show that an infinite number of things is in fact absurd. To do this they propose several examples that harken back to Galileo's
paradox. The examples all follow the form of there being an infinite set and a separate subset of that set (in some of the examples the subset is finite in some it is said to be infinite). The question arises when the subset is removed from the set. The set is still said to be infinite even though it is lacking. In Galileo's example the set can be represented by all numbers and the subset by the even ones. Both the set and the subset could be said to be infinite even though it would seem that the subset should be only half as many as the set. There are two problems with this argument: First the impossibility of division, and second the question of the validity of the paradox. First if the Mormon view is accepted then what we are dealing with is an infinite number of objects within an infinite space. If this is the case then there is no way of physically dividing sets and subsets. The second is an answer that James Thompson explains in response to the problem proposed by Galileo, that what I've been calling a subset is not actually a proper subset but a separate set in itself (Thompson 185).

The last argument that Beckwith and Parrish propose is that it is impossible for the Mormon God to achieve omniscience in time and space (Beckwith 71). This argument if correct does not rule out the Mormon God but rather it would only perhaps discredit Him. The argument states that because God has a body and is limited by time He can not possibly know every thing that is happening instantaneously. The fact that God has a body is an interesting argument for Beckwith and
Parrish to bring up, because as they pointed out earlier the term omnipresence in respect to the Mormon God refers to God's Spirit, not his body. As for the problem of time if the Mormon God's Spirit is omnipresent then time is not a factor any more for the Mormon God then it is for the classical God.

Beckwith and Parrish have only succeeded in adequately achieving one of their three goal that are covered in this paper. They did succeed in showing that "the Mormon concept of God differs radically from the classical concept of God" (Beckwith 1), but this was a given. They have raised some questions about infinite sets but have not adequately shown that "the Mormon concept of God contains many philosophical flaws" (Beckwith). And they have not adequately defended the traditional concept of God; leaving doubt as to: Why God created anything? How human freedom is compatible with His omniscience? And how God can be outside of time?
Bibliography


