The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has yet to develop a moral system. Surprisingly, I was only able to find one encyclopedia entry devoted to the topic, which was not technically a church publication. This is understandable given that Mormonism is one of the newest world religions. Brady Neil, the author of the entry, was able to sum up Mormon ethics in about two pages. We could sum it up in just a few sentences: “Latter-day Saints espouse an ethic of divine approbation; to discern the will of God and receive assurance that one is acting under God’s approval are the ceaseless quest of discipleship. This may be called Spirit-guided morality.”

Morality, according to Neal, is the act of following the will of God, and God expresses the divine will through the spirit, hence *spirit-guided morality*.

While Mormon Ethics is spirit-guided, it is important to acknowledge to what end this Spirit is guiding. Scripture describes the spirit as having many functions, but none of them are ends in themselves necessarily. One could say the Holy Spirit functions as an end to sanctification. However, sanctification is

---

2 Sanctification is not to be confused with Justification. Justification is a remission of sin; Christ remits the sin despite the nature of the sinner being unchanged. For a full treatment on these topics, see Robert Line’s book *Pure Before Thee* (American Fork: Covenant Communications, 2011).
not an end in itself, but is a process by which the nature of the sinner is changed. Sanctification is a process of creation\(^3\) that functions as a means to exaltation.\(^4\)

The Mormon ethic is both deontological, and teleological depending on the approach. According to Neal, both approaches are complimentary since “obedience to divine imperatives and pursuit of ultimate happiness are correlative elements in the maturation of human beings.” Because the Holy Spirit is a means to an end, and the end is exaltation, I will be taking a teleological approach later in this article.

**Revelation**

When Neal says “spirit-guided ethic,” what he means is revelation-guided ethic. Modern Latter Day Saint Theology\(^5\) narrowly defines revelation as visions, heavenly voices, angelic administrations, or warm feelings in the chest. What is interesting about this definition of revelation is that it points to the medium, and not the content. In other words, this definition of revelation describes the medium through which we obtain information, and does not consider the content of that information. Modern theology takes revelation at face value, and doesn’t seek for rational understanding.

In his work *The Transformation of Mormon Theology*, Kendall White, Jr. Calls this perception of revelation “dangerous,” and “not entirely consistent with traditional Mormonism.”\(^6\) Traditionally, Mormon revelation was rational in nature, and brought understanding where there was none: it held human rational in high esteem, and saw the fall of man as a good thing. Rationality kept revelation in check\(^7\). Mormon Orthodoxy made no distinction between religious and secular truths. Instead, “all things were religious”\(^8\)

Mormon Neoorthodoxy seems to view “reason and empiricism” with “contempt.”\(^9\) However, a spirit-guided ethic without rationality as a component

---

\(^3\) We often see ourselves as created beings, even though we are still in the process of being created. See Robert Line, *Understanding the Doctrine of God’s Time* (American Fork: Covenant Communications, 2015), 16, footnote 12.

\(^4\) Exaltation is living the kind of life God lives. *Gospel Principles* pg. 276.


\(^6\) White, 22.

\(^7\) Doctrine and Covenants [D&C] Section 50 expresses the need to legislate revelatory mediums. In this section, visions and direct revelations are legislated by concrete principles of reason such as edification.

\(^8\) White, 21.

\(^9\) Ibid. at 23. As examples, White points to the shifts in perceptions and interpretations of certain doctrines and verses. While Orthodox Mormonism saw knowledge as necessary for salvation, Neoorthodox Mormonism qualifies this teaching as only applicable to religious knowledge.
is little more than moral relativism. Individual actors need only to feel their act is according to God’s will to be justified, and no one on earth could argue against them. Galatians 5:22-23 says that the fruits of the spirit are “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance.” However, if actors are left to themselves to decide what these attributes actually mean, their answers will be relative to their socialization. It does little to tell others to be good if they as individuals control the definition of good. If we are to uphold a revelation-guided ethic, reason must be a component, or the Mormon ethic will be no ethic at all.

To distrust human reason is problematic in itself. After all, it was human reason that decided human reason couldn’t be trusted. Scripture seems to disagree with Neoorthodoxy’s distrust of reason. Doctrine and Covenants section 50 teaches that all revelation must edify, for “that which doth not edify is not of God.” To edify is to improve morally or intellectually. Edification requires reason. In 131:6, the Lord says, “it is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance.” If the Lord wanted humankind to distrust reason and lean on faith only, why would he highlight the importance of knowledge? How can we know without reason, “Reasoning is about knowing.” When it comes to knowledge about God, things can get a little weird. We can only reason about what we have known and experienced, and God is unlike anything we have known or experienced. But if reason is to be distrusted, why hasn’t the Lord said so?

In Christian Ethics, revelation is defined as a specific type of knowledge – knowledge “of” and “about” God. This definition highlights the aspect of revelation, which is important in ethical deliberation. It is not the medium by which revelation is obtained, but the revelation itself that is important. Whether we learn moral principles from an angel, biblical text, or philosopher, it makes no difference in ethics. What is important is that morality is learned. In other words, truth is truth regardless of the author. Christian Theology’s definition of revelation is more functional when discussing ethics. Moral is one of God’s perfect attributes, so knowledge of morality is knowledge of God.

Revelation is knowledge about God. The function of revelation is to improve individuals morally and intellectually. So, when we are discussing ethics, we are discussing revelation. Mormon ethics derives from principles found in the standard works, and is then discussed and applied to the current system in which we live.

---

While Orthodoxy focused on the positive aspects of the fall, Neoorthodoxy focuses on its negative aspects, which leads to a distrust of human reason. While God was once considered knowable, Neoorthodoxy focuses on his otherness.

10 D&C 50:23.

11 Hauerwas and Wells, 212.
**System-Sensitive Ethics**

Ethical codifiers have historically engaged in “thou shalt not” ethics, which do not take into account a changing world. Mormon theology takes into account the fact that the world changes, and along with it morally relevant information. This finds expression in the uniquely Mormon focus on living oracles who apply God’s word to the current system (society). While one approach to the Mormon ethic is teleological, we must account for the disparities between the system in which we live, and that in which God lives. In his article *The Tragedy of the Commons*, Garrett Hardin asserts, “The morality of an act is a function of the state of the system at the time it is performed.” In other words, most acts are not wrong in and of themselves; the wrongness or rightness of an act depends on other relevant facts. Whether the act is sex, theft, or overturning the tables of moneychangers, the rightness or wrongness depends not only on the act itself but on the system surrounding the act. For example, it is not wrong to kill and eat animals if it is absolutely necessary for survival:

> Yea, flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air, I, the Lord, have ordained for the use of man with thanksgiving; nevertheless they are to be used sparingly; And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine... and all wild animals that run or creep on the earth... these hath God made for the use of man only in times of famine and excess of hunger.

Animals are for the use of man only in times of need, and when they are used, they are to be used with thanksgiving.

Since there is no death in the eternities, there is no meat, as meat requires the death of a being. The eternal system is different than our system, and because morality is a function of a system, moral principles will have relatively different functions. Throughout the rest of this article I will argue that if an animal’s interest to live is in legitimate combat with a human’s interest to live, the resulting death of the animal is non-moral. Killing and eating an animal under these circumstances says nothing of the moral character of the human, but the inadequacies of the system. I will also argue that killing and eating animals under any other circumstance is morally wrong.

---

14 I am defining meat as the flesh of dead animals, and not in vitro meat.
Treatment of Animals

There are a few things we must take into consideration. Since the teleological end of the Mormon ethic is to live the kind of life God lives, we must first consider how God treats creation. It is important to note that after God created the earth, and all on it, he declared it good. If there is any verse from which we can extrapolate intrinsic worth it is this one. Creation is declared “good” before ever doing or becoming anything, suggesting that creation has intrinsic and not instrumental value to God. If we take this verse to denote the intrinsic worth of all humankind, we must also include all life; “it” was referring to all creation. Therefore, all life and all creation must have intrinsic and not instrumental value.

John Muir (1838-1913) in his book A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf came to a similar conclusion. He perceived that we viewed the world through an anthropocentric lens; the sheep were made as “food and clothing ‘for us,’” the whales were made to be “storehouses of oil for us.” Muir looked deeper than his nineteenth century associates and asked the question, “How about those man eating animals, or about those myriads of noxious insects that destroy labor and drink his blood? Doubtless man was intended for food and drink for all these?” In other words, if they were created for our consumption, why do they consume us? We were created within an ecological system, and we are part of that system, even if we choose not to recognize it.

Muir was right on multiple accounts. We’ve spent so much time and energy separating ourselves from the rest of creation that we honestly believe we are not part of that creation. We draw a thick line between us and nature, so thick that we believe nature’s only purpose is our convenience. On this Muir says “nature’s object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one.” His conclusion is absolutely in line with God’s word to the animals when he commanded each to multiply after their own kind, fulfill the measure of their creation, and have joy therein. The purpose of their joy is not our benefit but theirs, because they, like us, have intrinsic worth.

The intrinsic worth of God’s good creation puts the human-animal hierarchy under serious scrutiny. The scriptural basis of this hierarchy is found in the first chapter of Genesis: “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing

---

15 Genesis 1:31
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
that moveth upon the earth."\textsuperscript{19} This scripture seems to place humans above animals, creating a hierarchy. However, if animals have intrinsic worth, then the hierarchy cannot be referring to worth, but something else. We must consider whether or not this hierarchy has any moral relevance.

The words “dominion” and “subdue” have been used to justify animal mistreatment for thousands of years. However, the Hebrew words for “subdue” and “dominion,” kivshu and rdu, have a plethora of meanings. "Kivshu" for example, "can mean everything from ‘violate’ to ‘cherish.’"\textsuperscript{20} Since it was humans who controlled the translation, the words may have been interpreted to mean whatever benefited humans the most. These so called benefits have by and large been at the expense of animals and their legitimate interests to live, and to live without pain and suffering. The translations that ought to be chosen are not those which benefit humans the most, but those that make the most sense in the greater context of scripture. In other words, we need to see what else scripture says about the treatment of creation, and choose the meaning that best reflects this. Since I am not an expert in Hebrew, or the Old Testament, I will leave it to modern experts to decide the best translation. I will build my argument with the assumption that the King James translation is correct, though I seriously doubt that it is.

If we assume that “dominion” is the best translation of Genesis 1:28, we must also recognize that there are different kinds of dominion. This is explicitly noted in the Doctrine and Covenants: "we have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion."\textsuperscript{21}

Unrighteous dominion is explained as an exercise of "control" and "compulsion."\textsuperscript{22} In contrast, righteous dominion is explained in terms of love, gentleness, kindness, and no hypocrisy.\textsuperscript{23} Killing is an act of compulsion. Our treatment of animals in factory farms cannot be considered gentle, kind, or loving by any stretch of the imagination, and is especially hypocritical. I was in a room with Chris Foster once when he described hypocrisy as "doing unto others what you would not want done to you." He then described the way we treat animals as "super-hypocrisy: paying others to do what we aren't even able to watch." Animals on factory farms are kept in conditions so terrible that many die from stress long before entering the slaughterhouse. Many Latter Day Saints live in the United States and along with other Americans, consume more meat than

\textsuperscript{19} Genesis 1:28.
\textsuperscript{20} Hugh Nibley, “Man’s Dominion,” New Era Jan/1981.
\textsuperscript{21} D&C 121:39.
\textsuperscript{22} D&C 121:37.
\textsuperscript{23} D&C 121:41-46.
any other society in human history. About 9.1 billion\textsuperscript{24} factory farm animals were slaughtered and consumed last year just in the United States.\textsuperscript{25} Whatever righteous dominion looks like, it doesn't look like this.

If all creation is intrinsically good, then we are all equal in matters of moral consideration. That humans are to have dominion denotes a role that is not inherently superior, just different. There are differences in roles inside the church, but the New Testament teaches that these differences do not denote superiority, at least not in practice: “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve.”\textsuperscript{26} Earthly kings are not above their constituents, but "all are alike unto God."\textsuperscript{27} In like manner, humans are not above animals for all have inherent worth.

Arguing different degrees of inherent worth is logically incoherent. As Paul W. Taylor has pointed out, we have rejected the paradigm of hereditary social distinctions as unjust because groups with no relevant differences are given different treatment by social structures.

First, those born into the upper classes were deemed more worthy of respect than those born into the lower orders. Second, the superior worth of the upper class people had nothing to do with their merits nor did the inferior worth of those in the lower classes rest on their lack of merits. One’s superiority or inferiority entirely derived from a social position one was born into.\textsuperscript{28}

We acknowledge this fallacy when it is between humans, but do not amongst different classes of species. That one is born into the species \textit{Homo sapiens} shouldn’t give them greater moral consideration, nor does it give them license to treat all perceived “inferiors” with only instrumental value. Animals are every bit as relevant as humans in matters of moral consideration.

The moral relevance of animals is not based on their similarities or differences to us. We are different, but said difference does not innately denote superiority. To base our moral treatment on an animal’s likeness to us is to refer to morally irrelevant premises. Our differences do not denote superiority or inferiority; they are simply differences. Just as feminists have wondered why

\textsuperscript{24} “These data do not include statistics on the slaughter of fish, crustaceans, rabbits, and other farmed animals for whom the USDA does not provide information.” (Humane Society, \textit{Farm Animal Statistics: Slaughter Totals}. Humane Society, 2002. Web. 22 Nov 2015).
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} 2 Nephi 26:33.
\textsuperscript{28} Taylor, 214.
women have to be like men in order to be equal, we can ask "why do animals have to be like us to have inherent value?"\textsuperscript{29} To be different is to be different, and as Peter Singer has suggested, two different things can be equal if equality is a moral word describing a prescription for treatment. Singer states, “The extension of the basic principle of equality from one group to another does not imply that we must treat both groups in exactly the same way... The basic principle of equality... is equality of consideration.”\textsuperscript{30} That a scriptural hierarchy exists is indisputable, but those within hierarchies are equal in their intrinsic value to God. Therefore, mere position is irrelevant in matters of treatment and consideration. There are no superiors or inferiors before God, all are equal.

How then would human-animal (or animal-human) equality translate into everyday life? The interests of humans would be equally considered with the interests of other animals, which means animals would not be treated as things but as people. Gary L. Francione in his work \textit{Animals as Persons} illustrated this well when he discussed his fictional character Simon. “Simon proposes to torture a dog by burning the dog with a blowtorch. Simon’s only reason for torturing the dog is that he derives pleasure from this sort of activity.”\textsuperscript{31} Francione goes on to say “the primary reason that we find Simon’s action morally objectionable is its effect on the dog.”\textsuperscript{32} It is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering, whether that suffering is experienced by a human, or any other living creature. Later in the book, Francione quantifies the implications of his conclusion,

Nearly all of our animal use can be justified only by habit, convention, amusement, convenience, or pleasure. To put the matter another way, most of the suffering that we impose on animals is completely unnecessary, and we are not substantially different from Simon, who proposes to blowtorch the dog for pleasure.\textsuperscript{33}

Most of the suffering we cause animals is unnecessary. We place our trivial interests of taste, amusement, and convenience above their legitimate interests to life, self-determination, and absence of pain. That animals have intrinsic worth means that that their interests ought to be equally considered with our own.

That humans may eat animals when their survival depends on it is not immoral; instead it is non-moral. It is done with the understanding that the

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 36.
interests of all involved have been weighed, and the system in which both exist was inadequate to satisfy equal but competing interests. In this scenario, the death of an animal is equally considered with the suffering of a human caused by not killing the animal. Eating animals in the context of need is not hypocritical, as we would eat with the understanding that the animal would eat us under similar circumstances. By stating this I am stating that a usually immoral act is not immoral under certain circumstances. Because an act cannot be performed outside a system (be it ecological, economic, political etc.), the system must be considered. Specifically, I am arguing that the suffering of the animal is a result of a system that could not sustain the life of both the animal and the human, and that whatever the human chooses to do (allow herself/himself to die or kill and eat the animal) is non-moral. I make no distinction between commission and omission, but assume that omitting the death of the animal is allowing the death of oneself.

Acknowledging human-animal equality makes sense in the light of God's life, who considers the lilies of the field, as well as the hairs of man’s head, who knows the fall of every sparrow, and the intentions of every human heart. Giving animals moral consideration is part of God’s divine nature, and may be part of our own nature if we subtract centuries of socialization. Acknowledging animal equality means we would not eat them unless prompted by absolute necessity. This is categorically in line with verses in the Doctrine and Covenants, both those already mentioned, and the following: “And whoso forbiddeth to abstain from meats, that man should not eat the same, is not ordained of God;”34 “and wo be unto man that sheddeth blood or that wasteth flesh and hath no need.”35 Note the double negative “forbiddeth to abstain.” Whosever Forbids one from abstaining from meats is “not of God.” The word “need” is also enlightening. “Need” and “want” are commonly used interchangeably. However, we ought to assume that “need” refers to survival. Since we do not need to satisfy our trivial desires of taste, we ought to eat meat only when it is needed for our survival. Only eating meat when necessary is also in line with our knowledge of the millennium. If there is no death in the millennium, there is no meat, and if there is no meat then will we not all be vegetarian?

In conclusion, current practices of meat consumption are immoral because they ignore an animal’s interest to live, and because they cause unnecessary suffering. We ought to acknowledge the intrinsic value of animals, and live accordingly. However, whether we acknowledge it or not, it is evident that God does. In a society that could easily survive and thrive without animal consumption, animal consumption has no moral justification.

---

34 D&C 49:18.
Bibliography


Hardin, Garrett. ”The Tragedy of the Commons.” Science 162.3859 (1968): 1243-1248. Print


