

## Futility and Faith in The Book of Mormon: Mormon, Adorno, and the Eternal Perspective

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*“My son, be faithful in Christ; and may not the things which I have written grieve thee, to weigh thee down unto death; but may Christ lift thee up.” -Mormon to Moroni (Moroni 9:25).*

The beginning of the twentieth century was a discouraging time for many European thinkers. Hannah Arendt called this period a “break in our history” and attributed this sense of rupture to the emergence across Europe of totalitarian regimes whose violence and ideological coercion far outpaced the conceptual categories of the western philosophical tradition.<sup>1</sup> The result of this conceptual failure was “a chaos of mass-perplexities,” expressing themselves in both art and philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Examples of this perplexity are easy to find: from Samuel Beckett’s grimly minimalist plays, one of which ends with the injunction to “make sense who may,”<sup>3</sup> to the fragmented philosophical texts of E. M. Cioran who wonders if the only escape from “the calamity of consciousness” would be to “rejoin animals, plants, things, return to that primordial stupidity of which, through the fault of history, we have lost even the memory.”<sup>4</sup> Read out of context, despondent utterances like these may seem a bit melodramatic. Recognizing these authors’ work within the landscape of the moral, political, and philosophical catastrophe that initiated the twentieth century helps account for their despair, however hyperbolic their articulation of it may sound.

Perhaps the most expressive accounts of this experience of the philosophical discouragement of the twentieth century are those of Theodore Adorno, a cultural philosopher and sociologist who left Europe for America at the beginning of the 1940s to escape the Nazi regime. During this exile, Adorno wrote his book, *Minima Moralia, Reflections on a Damaged Life*, as an attempt to theorize the effects of totalitarian ideology on human experience. In that book he presents a wide array of evidence culled from his scrutiny of the quotidian contents of Western life

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Viking, 1968), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Beckett, *What Where. Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 316.

<sup>4</sup> E. M. Cioran, “Thinking Against Oneself,” in *The Temptation to Exist* (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 47.

(ranging from the experience of nature to the experience of stubborn window frames<sup>5</sup>) to conclude that any conception of the modern western subject based on autonomy fails to recognize “the objective powers that determine individual existence even in its most hidden recesses.”<sup>6</sup> For Adorno, these objective forces (most obviously incarnated in the fascist regimes of Europe but similarly active in the consumer capitalism of the United States), so thoroughly estrange people from the reality of their lives that they become like characters in a novel, “no more than component parts of machinery act[ing] as if they still had the capacity to act as subjects, and as if something depended on their actions.”<sup>7</sup> Adorno’s view is one of extreme futility: it is only “as if” human agency exists, only “as if” our actions determine the quality of our life.

Although Adorno’s interpretation of the modern condition is rooted in a specific historical moment, it’s not difficult to feel a similar sense of despair in the present. Whether in reference to the disturbing resurgence of fascist political rhetoric and regimes, or to the increasing omnipresence of consumer culture with its accompanying technological mediation of experience, Adorno’s critiques continue to feel discouragingly pertinent. My intention in beginning this essay with a rehearsal of Adorno’s context and thought is not, however, to make a claim for his present-day relevance as a cultural theorist. Rather, I’m interested in the emotional force implicit in this way of thinking, which Adorno himself described as a “melancholy science.”<sup>8</sup> I want to focus, in other words, not so much on the rationale Adorno uses to posit futility as the defining feature of modern life, but rather the way that this futility *feels* as a lived experience. More specifically still, I want to consider the role this feeling of futility born from a sense of individual powerlessness in the face of social structures might play in our lives as latter-day saints.

For perhaps obvious reasons, Adorno’s melancholy science, and modernist despair more generally, seem out of sync with a world view informed by the gospel. As latter-day saints we actively cultivate (and encourage others to cultivate) an “eternal perspective,” which, as Elder Dale G. Renlund describes, “means we remember that life is more than the here and now, that life continues after death, and that our choices have eternal consequences.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast to Adorno’s conviction that choice is impossible and actions meaningless, Renlund describes them as eternally significant. While Adorno’s doctrine of futility carries an implicit emotional weight of despair, an eternal perspective offers the peace that Christ describes when he told his disciples before his death, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16: 33). In this scripture Christ comforts his disciples in advance of the tribulation they will face in the world after he has gone. Christ’s words here are reassuring because they implicitly situate tribulation in a temporally bound world that Christ has overcome.

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<sup>5</sup> As evidence that “technology is making gestures precise and brutal,” Adorno rhetorically asks, “What does it mean for the subject that there are no more casement windows to open, but only sliding frames to shove?” Even interactions with everyday objects, in other words, require “the violent, hard-hitting, unrelenting jerkiness of Fascist maltreatment” (40).

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia, Reflections on a Damaged Life* (Verso, 2005), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Adorno, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Dale G. Renlund, “Maintaining an Eternal Perspective.” *Ensign*, March 2014, 58.

This reassuring knowledge of the world transcending power of Christ's Atonement has comforted me many times throughout my life, and I consider this comfort one of the most valuable blessings that comes through faith in the Gospel. At the same time, however, I hesitate to regard this eternal perspective as a panacea against the despair that seems a fundamental component of contemporary experience.

For proof that despair in the face of futility is not only compatible with but at times central to an eternal perspective, I turn to The Book of Mormon. Framing the book's beautiful teachings about faith, charity, and redemption is a dour chronicle of a civilization dragged into annihilation by political corruption, racial warfare, and genocide. Not surprisingly, this hostile socio-political atmosphere provokes frequent and eloquent articulations of despair from Book of Mormon prophets who are dedicated to a life founded on principles of charity and hope in Christ. One of the most trenchant articulations of this despair is Mormon's final letter to his son Moroni that stands as the penultimate chapter to The Book of Mormon. In this letter Mormon informs Moroni of the hopeless state of the Nephite's war against the Lamanites, admitting with a grim matter-of-factness "I fear lest the Lamanites should destroy this people" (Moroni 9:3). If Mormon the military leader is pessimistic about the fate of the war, Mormon the prophet is even more despondent:

Behold, I am laboring with them continually; and when I speak the word of God with sharpness they tremble and anger against me; and when I use no sharpness they harden their hearts against it; wherefore, I fear lest the Spirit of the Lord hath ceased striving with them. (Moroni 9:4)

Mormon's sense of futility in his role as spiritual leader resonates loudly in this verse: regardless of his approach, whether sharp or soft, his people remain unyielding in their depravity and thus immune to the transformative power of the spirit. The predicament that Mormon describes here as a futile double bind resembles one of Adorno's most famous formulations from *Minima Moralia*. After describing in detail one of his many examples of the lose-lose decisions which life in a consumer capitalist society offers its subjects, Adorno tersely asserts, "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly."<sup>10</sup> Life in a world, in other words, that so exhaustively precludes meaningful or moral action does not offer any chances to live rightly. How can a person choose the right when there is nothing right to choose?

That Mormon is not so quick to relinquish his sense of moral agency to his desperate situation is clear a few verses later. He warns Moroni that despite the hardness of the Nephites' hearts, and despite the futility of his own teachings, it is necessary to "labor diligently . . . for we have a labor to perform whilst in this tabernacle of clay, that we may conquer the enemy of all righteousness, and rest our souls in the kingdom of God" (Moroni 9:6). Mormon here appeals to Moroni's (and no doubt his own) eternal perspective regardless of the immediate futility of their labor, it will be boundlessly validated in the kingdom of God. But before filing Mormon's letter away as yet another example of the triumph of the eternal perspective over worldly woes, I want to consider the extent to which Mormon feels the acute and painful sense of entrapment in what Adorno would call a "wrong life." After encouraging Moroni to labor diligently, Mormon

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<sup>10</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 39.

substantiates with harsh detail his claim that the Nephites “have lost their love, one towards another; and they thirst after blood and revenge continually” (Moroni 9:5). Although he also describes the aberrant violence of the Lamanites against whom the Nephites battle, Mormon insists that the “great abomination of the Lamanites . . . doth not exceed that of our own people” (Moroni 9:9). What sort of opportunities for righteousness are available to a person in Mormon’s position? How can a person who knows the people he leads into battle are more bloodthirsty, more vengeful, and more dead to love than their enemies consider his actions just? How can he navigate all that is wrong about his life and manage to live rightly?

My intention in raising these questions is not to undermine Mormon’s example as a dedicated follower and diligent servant of Christ. On the contrary, my point is that in the case of Mormon (and to a lesser extent in the case of anyone whose social historical situation seems so inimical to justice and righteousness that no choice is obviously or convincingly right) futility is not an experience that can be escaped or dismissed by a simple change in perspective. In his letter to Moroni, Mormon undoubtedly articulates a perspective that looks forward to eternal life, but this looking forward is not an overlooking of the immanent conditions of brutal violence that surrounds him. This inability to overlook is evident in Mormon’s reluctance to fully dissociate himself from the iniquity he sees: “O my son, how can a people like this, whose delight is in so much abomination — How can we expect that God will stay his hand in judgment against us” (Moroni 9:13–14). The shift in these verses from “a people like this” to “we” and “us” is telling of Mormon’s entanglement in the fate of his people despite his rejection of their sin. If Mormon’s earlier description of rest in the kingdom of God indicated how his eternal perspective offered him relief from the trauma of the present, here his allusion to judgment binds him to the people whose atrocities surround him. Mormon’s eternal perspective, in other words, works to sharpen his pain in the present even as it alleviates it with a hope for the future.

What I find so instructive about Mormon’s unique example of an eternal perspective is the way it simultaneously orients him toward eternal life *and* the earthly situation in which he suffers. More importantly, it orients him toward the people who he struggles to serve despite the apparent futility of this service. Mormon’s perspective, in other words, does not appeal to the eternal as a way of escaping or insulating himself from the catastrophic suffering and violence of his people; rather it obliges him to share in this suffering and violence even as he denounces it in his teachings. What Mormon offers us, then, is an eternal perspective that foregrounds rather than erasing his own entanglement with his earthly situation, consisting as it does of an exasperating responsibility to a self-destructive community and a sense of foreclosed agency. It’s an eternal perspective that recognizes Mormon’s earthly situation, with all its trauma and injustice, as constitutive of his eternal biography, not incidental to it.

For me, Mormon’s example of an eternal perspective is a crucial one for navigating a world that is increasingly discouraging and seemingly hopeless. Mormon demonstrates how discipleship in dark times requires a difficult kind of bifocal view that can see earthly misery clearly enough to truly “mourn with those who mourn” while also maintaining an equally clear vision of Christ’s eternally redemptive power (Mosiah 18:9). This bifocal perspective is the opposite of an escape from or a disregard of earthly sorrow. Rather it is an attempt to come to terms with sorrow as an experience that is a crucial part of our earthly and eternal lives and to recognize this sorrow as something we share with all God’s children.

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