Mormon Studies Review

Volume 1 | Number 1 Article 19

1-1-2014

Adam S. Miller, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology*

Reviewed by Stephen H. Webb

may not derail Bowman's narrative directions, but it is our business to ask whether and how they might. And in any case, we would do well to compare parallel and divergent tracks en route to better understandings of the demands and expectations for our own (political, religious, historiographic, lexicographic) Mormon Moment.

David Walker is assistant professor of religious studies at UC Santa Barbara. His "Transporting Mormonism: Railroads and Religious Sensation in the American West," in *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, ed. Sally M. Promey (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming 2014), treats railroad companies' influence on popular understandings of Mormonism.

Review of Adam S. Miller. *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. 160 pp. $75.00 hardcover.

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Traditionally speaking, metaphysics, at least in a form that has been useful for Christian theology, has been synonymous with the Platonic conception of a hierarchically ordered cosmos. In this view, the world is arranged in interlocking levels of reality that correspond to qualitatively different kinds of experience. Knowledge is the outcome of a journey into intangible universals that turn out to shine with more lucidity than the phenomena given to our perception. The more one penetrates the real, the less physical it becomes—and the same can be said about us. Our souls are as light as the divine, which suggests a shared substance or original unity. Reason's labor provides a measure of how far we have fallen, just as reason's attainment is an indication of how far we may yet rise. The virtues, which discipline our recalcitrant bodies, clear the path

back that reason must follow. Perception has its role, since desire moves the will, but only the unexpected harmonies of beauty can awaken the soul's yearning for a peace that fulfills all understanding. On the assumption that the internal concord of the soul should reflect the unfettered splendor of the divine, great cultures have been built. The true, the good, and the beautiful are one above just as they should become united for individuals and societies alike.

For much of Western history, this metaphysical scheme was inseparable from cosmological speculations, thanks to the central role played by Plato's *Timaeus*. Night's darkness revealed the brilliance of the stars, and the wise ones assumed that their light was meant for us to see. However elaborately articulated, this was the common sense of the Christian worldview. The gradations of truth corresponded to a cosmic topography. Philosophy scaled a ladder that was at once physical and spiritual. True, the spiritual was immaterial, but it carried enough weight to uphold the education of our senses and the redirection of our desires.

This venture took a radically different turn in the Renaissance, when the mathematization of observation began the homogenization of ontology. Knowledge was still a matter of idealization, but the process of abstraction was completely different from the realization of universals. Abstract concepts have a formal power that belies the personally transformative demands of universal truths. Modernity thus witnessed the loss of knowledge's metaphysical depth as facts replaced types and the goal of inquiry bent downward to immanence rather than upward toward transcendence. Morality became another object to study rather than the prerequisite for all inquiry, and beauty, severed from the question of truth, became just another word for entertainment. The more infinite the cosmos became, the more flat was the world. Stripped of its layers of meaning, nature was forced to submit to the intrusive methodologies of technical expertise, not the plaintive queries of the lovers of wisdom.

Even after the intellectual revolutions that severed wisdom from the evidence of the senses, however, Platonic metaphysics continued to prosper as it took an inward turn. If truth was no longer crowned by the beckoning shapes of perfect spheres, one could always turn within to discover

infinite intensities of spiritual depth. Only atheists denied that this world is but a shadow cast by the brightness of a greater truth.

Nonetheless, with no cosmic light to mirror, the soul proved to be too muddled to inspire endless reflection. Metaphysics floundered in these shallow waters, with some philosophers applying the practical advantages of science to old philosophical topics while others tried to refurbish bits and pieces of the Platonic project like collectibles salvaged from a long abandoned warehouse. Theology too lost direction. The disconnection of the spiritual from the material left faith appealing to the sheer fact of revelation—and it did not matter whether that authority was located in the Bible or the church—or it turned religion into an instrument of moral inspiration and social improvement.

Grace, in the old scheme, was a matter of the higher making room for the lower (and in Christianity, it was a matter of the highest making room for the lowest). But now space, whether its expansion is infinite or cyclical, is void of depth even amidst its multiplying dimensions, and thus our material world no longer gives us the coordinates for distinguishing a vertical ascent from a horizontal maze.

We are surely not done with being Platonic, but we do need a new metaphysics to respond to new cosmologies, and Adam Miller has found one. His very important book is both a splendid introduction to the thought of the French philosopher Bruno Latour and a provocative and original reflection on the possibilities for grace in an age of metaphysical materialism. I think it is right to identify Latour (and Miller) as metaphysical materialists, even though they are developing a nonstandard interpretation of matter that does away with its usual connotations as well as its philosophical lineage, but more on that below.

Miller pursues two questions. What if objects are all that we have? If so, is there room in a world of things for something as lacking in objectivity as grace? These two questions are separable, so I will first describe Miller's interpretation of Latour's thought and then comment on his attempt to find a place for grace in this new metaphysical terrain.

For Latour (and Miller throughout this book adopts Latour's views as his own), classical metaphysics is, in Miller's word, conspiratorial. It

is always on the search for a fundamental unity lurking behind the observable course of scattered events. From this perspective, all metaphysics is reductionistic, even if the reality it seeks is "higher" instead of "lower" than the available phenomena. Religion too is reductionistic—as are all attempts to prove religion illusory. Conspiracy theories are dependent on the metaphysics of invisible forces, while a metaphysics of objects—this is Miller's wager—forces us to take things as they are.

The only solution to reductionism is to liberate all objects from every attempt to fold them into a single interpretive scheme. Latour calls this the principle or irreduction. This principle does not mean that reductions are not useful. On the contrary, everything can be reduced, deduced, and aligned with everything else. Irreduction is as impossible as reduction because objects are infinitely divisible and compoundable, which is another way of saying that nothing in the world is one (united, whole, or complete). Miller explains this by saying that objects are both resistant and available. They are always available for reduction, but even when they are reduced, they leave a remainder (that is available for other groupings or constructs).

Latour's metaphysics is experimental (which does not actually tell us much, since Latour, according to Miller, thinks "a good experiment is a bit of theater," p. 114). Its conclusions are provisional and its method is slow and easygoing as it resists any rush to ontological judgments. It consists, nonetheless, of many axioms and gnomic statements, like the following (from Latour): "There are more of us than we thought" (p. 15). This is, perhaps, what Leibniz's *Monadology* would look like had it been written by a polytheist, or written with a Husserlian turn to the things themselves without all of the fuss about states of intentional consciousness. In Miller's words, "Rather than axiomatizing the One, he axiomatizes the many" (p. 15). The result is a decidedly flat world with no levels of being and none of the corresponding variations in intensity of experience. Miller argues that this prevents objects themselves from being flattened by the predeterminations of "deep" metaphysical systems.

Politically speaking, Latour's leveled landscape is decidedly democratic. "To be an object," Miller explains, "is to be a politician" (p. 20).

With no conspiracies to chart and no scapegoats to blame, everyone must engage in the small compromises and adjustments that constitute modern liberal democracies. The only thing stopping objects from acting like a mob is their sheer proliferation. Latour grants objects a certain kind of agency, but this is not an experiment in panpsychism, which is one of the major differences between Latour and Alfred North Whitehead. It almost seems as if Latour projects agency onto objects because he leaves so little room for extra-objective forces that can move objects around. Matter for Latour is not to be confused with "nature." Nature is an organic whole that finds its meaning when contrasted with a height or depth that borders and attempts to tame its wildness. Objects are not natural any more than they are supernatural. They are also not subjected to the dualism of form and substance (although he treats form as the way in which objects are used and matter as the source of each object's resistance to such use, which is a pragmatic updating of metaphysic's oldest division). Since they are agents, and very weak agents at that, they give themselves a variety of forms and assume many guises without ever being a single identifiable form that can be discerned by rational understanding. This seems to me like a modern version of Scotus's doctrine of the plurality of substantial forms. (Miller also accepts and radicalizes Scotus's univocal treatment of language about God.)

One of the challenges in thinking about Latour is that he works so hard to overcome every traditional dualism. He is, for example, neither a realist nor a constructionist, nor is he some mixture of the two. His train of thought is conjunctive. Epistemology is ontology, the nonhuman is human, the one is multiple, and so on. Everything is something else and never just itself, even though the goal of phenomenology is to allow objects "to speak on their own behalf" (p. 125).

Latour maps his position not only by scattering unsystematic axioms but also by asserting redefinitions of ordinary words. Representation is translation, causation is fulcrum, transcendence is fermentation, and reality is defined by troublemaking and recalcitrance. The nomenclature is almost intentionally arbitrary. "That which layers and forms processions I will call *angel*," Latour writes, "in contrast to that which aligns and maintains networks, which I call *instrument*" (p. 126). Thus does objectivism

slide into nominalism when words themselves become nothing more than objects.

The world is a mess, and so is our knowledge of it. Indeed, our lack of knowledge of things evidently corresponds to their lack of unity. Latour is a realist of the unreal. This can sound awfully banal at times. "An object's situation," Miller writes, "is always composed of ramifying complexities" (p. 56). Miller seems happy with the resulting relativism. "In an object-oriented metaphysics," he admits, "the truthfulness of a statement depends solely on the number of relevant agents persuaded to line-up behind it" (p. 103). If everyone reading this review were to vote on that statement, I am confident we would invalidate it.

As for God, well, "if God exists, he is no metaphysical king" (p. 19). God too must be a politician, cajoling and compromising in order to get anything done. Absent any sovereign, intentions are advanced only through committees that have little power, just as in the modern academy! Miller follows the noted Mormon philosopher James Faulconer in resituating the verticality of transcendence on a horizontal plane. Transcendence is everywhere; there are no privileged objects, as with Martin Heidegger's fixation with Vincent van Gogh's painting of a pair of old, worn-out shoes. In fact, this view of objects presupposes the eternity of matter (see p. 32), and not just any old eternity of matter. Matter is not eternally chaotic but eternally formed, so that there are no original forms or a first former of all that exists; there are only eternally mutable objects that pass through the flux of this and that in ways that defy a stable rational analysis.

Where does grace fit in? Grace is the most subtle of theological terms, a word that conveys something of the ethereal and evanescent, crisscrossing between the otherworldly and the mundane. It is that aspect of God's nature that works in us to bring about our participation in him. Force, energy, and light provide the network of images and ideas that are most naturally drawn to the experience of grace. Grace is relational, pervasive, and personal. As pure gift and thus unexpected event, it never congeals into a stable concept. Whatever it is, it is not an object. Indeed, the cardinal rule about grace in Christian theology could be this: Thou shalt not turn grace into an object. It is not something that

can be manipulated, even when, in High Church traditions, it is conveyed through tangible symbols or physical relics. When grace is objectified, it becomes its opposite, a dark desire for mastery that seeks to take the place of God. To handle it is to destroy it. At least that is the traditional, Protestant-inspired view of grace that even many Catholics have bought into today. This book—which asks the question, "What happens when we suspend our knowledge of what force is?" (p. 37)—helps us to see how very wrong everything about that view is, as well as how hard it is going to be to replace it.

I was prepared to love this book because of my sense of how Catholic Latour's metaphysics is (confession: I am Roman Catholic). I wanted to see how Miller would rethink grace absent the fear of rendering it empirical and demonstrable. The heirs of the Protestant Reformation, albeit against the intentions of the Reformers, turned grace into a forensic event—a singular divine judgment that can be accepted by individuals at any time, as long as they plead guilty and promise to change their ways. Grace thus happens only in the cross for God and in the head for us. It is not mediated by objects, and it has no earthly weight or visible reality. It is certainly not a substance! It does not denote a change in the divine, and it actually does not change anything in us. We remain sinners, but by acknowledging our guilt, we become free of the punishment we so rightly deserve. Grace so construed always happens somewhere between us and God and never here and now.

When Miller speaks about grace, he has two voices. One is in tune with the Catholic sacramental imagination. For example, he is drawn to grace that is downsized, reduced from "large-scale forces of cosmic progress" to micro-movements of adjustments and supplementations (p. 3). That brief comment promises to take an object-oriented view of grace in new and exciting directions. Grace for Miller forces us to confront the obstinate reality of things. It brings the world closer, which is the exact opposite of science, which makes the world go away (vanishing in abstract mathematical formulas). "Science," he writes, "corrects for our nearsightedness, religion for our farsightedness" (p. 119). Science, from this perspective, is much more miraculous and unbelievable than religion. Grace itself is a kind of object that gets in the way of our attempts

to order the objects that pass through our lives. If thought of as a force, it would be a very weak force, competing for our attention, unable to move anything on its own. "Religion aims at illuminating objects that are too near rather than too far" (p. 126). Grace is a form of attention that keeps us focused and blocks our efforts to escape from the real.

That is what Miller sounds like when he is being Catholic, and I want to hear much more. But there is another voice he assumes, and it speaks in the Protestant language of a judgment that extends infinitely beyond what is necessary and required. Updated for postmodern sensitivities, this is the language of excess—of a purely rhetorical realm that transcends the ordinary and everyday. Miller thus writes that grace is "prodigal in that it is in excess of what is deserved or expected" (p. 78). So understood, grace is "passively received rather than actively controlled" (p. 79), a statement that reiterates the Protestant claim that grace must be either freely given or laboriously earned with no in-between. When he is being Protestant, Miller says very simply that grace "is free and unconditioned" (p. 79). It is the opposite of objects because it does not need to enter into the economy of exchange and negotiation. It cannot be contracted. It begins where objects disappear.

Perhaps the problem in applying Latour to grace lies more with Latour than Miller himself. If the psychological malaise that haunts traditional metaphysics is paranoia—the sense that there is a power behind the scene controlling everything—the corresponding malady of Latour's object-oriented system is schizophrenia—an inability to make coherent causal connections. (Latour calls the attempt to create commensurable relationships among objects "stacking," p. 56.) There are no universals for Latour, but there are networks and associations. Latour's objects, like people in today's world, have no lasting loyalties or deep commitments to enduring identities. Instead, they hook up in relationships of convenience and mutual satisfaction. This is a philosophy that could only be written from and for the modern secular university, with its affirmation of disjointed areas of study, its painful inability to forge a substantive identity, and its methodological atheism. Miller talks about suffering, but that discussion is tangential at best to his theory of objects. In fact, his thoughts about suffering (as opposed to pain!) appeal to the category of depth that

he otherwise disavows. Besides, a graceful account of objects should be playful, but when Miller talks grace, he is all somber and serious.

I didn't fall in love with this book, but it did end up making me hope that in his future books, Latour decreases and Miller increases. There was great promise in Miller's previous work, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (2012), but this book is not the payoff. Instead, it is more promises. We need a materialistic metaphysics for a variety of reasons, even though I am not sure that Americans need to be persuaded to spend more time getting closer to objects, but I trust Miller's promising work, more than Latour's, to lead us there.

Stephen H. Webb, who earned his PhD from the University of Chicago, taught religion and philosophy for twenty-five years at Wabash College. His most recent book is *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (Oxford University Press, 2013), and he is working on a book, with Alonzo Gaskill, on Mormon–Roman Catholic dialogue.

Review of Stephen H. Webb. *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 343 pp. $70.00 hardcover.

Reviewed by Adam S. Miller

"The word *matter* is, in philosophy, the name of a problem."
—Bertrand Russell

The superstructure of practices and beliefs in which Mormons pray, serve, and live is pretty well defined. But this system, for good and bad, is free floating. Mormon beliefs have an internal coherence that gives their meaning a pragmatic stability, but the system as a whole isn't tethered to