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### The Nature of Law: Universal but not Uniform

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LANE  
FISCHER

*The  
Nature  
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Law*

UNIVERSAL BUT  
NOT UNIFORM

*And unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every  
law there are certain bounds also and conditions.*

—D&C 88:38

Every system of thought must eventually deal with order, chance, and the nature of law. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how the restored gospel of Jesus Christ defines the nature of law and to identify the implications of such a definition for psychotherapy. First, I will briefly examine the apparent tension between two competing secular models: modernism and postmodernism. Then I will highlight how that apparent tension continues in spiritually based models of law. Next I will argue that a reconceptualization of infinity resolves the tension between the models. Given that argument, I will explain how law is universal but not uniform across ecologies. A brief discussion of how God organizes variable ecologies is followed by the primary implication for psychotherapy.

### Modernism versus Postmodernism

John A. Widtsoe (1908) was a Latter-day Saint scholar whose scientific inquiry was grounded in modernism. His text *Joseph Smith as Scientist* is based on the belief that “the great, fundamental laws of the Universe are foundation stones in religion as well as science” (p. 1). Widtsoe was so convinced of modernism and Mormonism that he used their congruence as proof of each other. “At every point of contact,” he said, “the sanest of modern philosophy finds counterpart in the theological structure of the Gospel as taught by Joseph Smith” (p. 71). Zygmunt Bauman (1992) is a sociologist who has explored postmodernism. His text *Intimations of Postmodernity* articulates the reactionary rise of postmodernism and its implications for intellectual life. Both Widtsoe and Bauman dealt with the nature of law but came to very different conclusions.

Widtsoe taught that nature is essentially unknowable. He noted that humans know things only by their effects on other things. Before the rise of modernism, the unknowability of nature led to harmful superstition. As scholars observed the regularity in relationships between events, they articulated a principle of cause and effect. Widtsoe stated, “As this principle of the constancy in the relations between cause and effect was established, the element of chance in natural phenomena, with its attendant arts of magic, had to disappear” (pp. 32–33).

From the principle of cause and effect emerged the search for the governing laws of nature through which all phenomena could

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be explained, predicted, and controlled. Before science set out to discover the laws of nature, modernism made an assumption about the nature of law. Widsøe taught that the

laws of nature are, therefore, man's simplest and most comprehensive expression of his knowledge of certain groups of natural phenomena. They are man-made, and subject to change as knowledge grows; but, as they change, they approach or should approach more and more nearly to the perfect law. Modern science is built upon the assumption that the relations between cause and effect are invariable, and that these relations may be grouped to form great natural laws, which express the modes by which the forces of the universe manifest themselves. (p. 34)

He further spoke of the nature of unexplained phenomena:

It must also be admitted that men possess no absolute certainty that though certain forces, brought into a certain conjunction a thousand times, have produced the same effect, they will continue to do so. Should a variation occur, however, that also must be ascribed to an inherent property of the forces or conditions, or the existence of a law not understood. There can be no chance in the operation of nature. This is a universe of law and order. (p. 35)

Finally, Widsøe concluded that “none can transcend the law. In the material world or in the domain of ether or spirit, like causes produced like effects—the reign of law is supreme” (p. 37).

Modernism assumes that natural laws exist in the universe and that human beings discover them by application of observation and reason. Widsøe conceded that humans' articulation of the laws of nature are approximations but assumed that “the perfect law” does exist. He was convinced that there is no chance in the universe and that all things are fixed in invariant conjunctions. The essence of Widsøe's argument is that human beings are part of a universe in which natural laws preexist them and govern their existence—natural laws exist outside of humans' construction of them.

Bauman (1992) also identified the ultimate unknowability of nature. He opined that modernism arose out of the fear that nature is unpredictable and that life is full of contingency. He judged the rise of modern science and its obsession with control as a flight from the ambiguous uncertainty of life. While Widsøe averred that the reign of law is supreme, Bauman denied the supposed

lawfulness of all things. Bauman expressed the postmodern view that all laws of nature are merely convenient human inventions. Belief in such laws is essentially imposed by the existing social power structures. While Widtsoe acknowledged that scientific laws are approximations of the underlying perfect law, Bauman argued that there is no underlying perfect law and that such approximations are only myths to live by.

Bauman defined the postmodern state of mind as an attempt to face the contingencies of life without the order imposed by authority:

Postmodernity . . . does not seek to substitute one truth for another, one standard of beauty for another, one life ideal for another. . . . It denies in advance the right of all and any revelation to slip into the place vacated by the deconstructed/discredited rules. It braces itself for a life without truths, standards and ideals. (p. ix)

While postmodernism has been criticized for its destructive influence and refusal to replace “one truth for another,” Bauman described its work as a site-clearing operation that scrapes the dross off of the truth:

While renouncing what merely passes for the truth, dismantling its past, present and future putative, ossified versions, it uncovers the truth in its pristine form which modern pretensions had maimed and distorted beyond recognition. More than that: the demolition uncovers *the truth of the truth*, truth as residing in the being itself and not in the violent acts performed upon it; truth that has been belied under the domination of legislative reason. (p. ix)

Postmodernity denies the orderliness of the universe and focuses on the chance and unpredictability of it. It denies any authority to define truth. Rather, it places truth at the center of each being. The essence of Bauman’s argument is that law ultimately arises from within the individual. It does not preexist nor govern human behavior *a priori*.

While modernism assumes the existence of self-existent natural law, postmodernism does not. It assumes that all descriptions of law are convenient myths. It further asserts that laws are constructions in people’s minds. While we may share common myths as cultural laws or mores, ultimately any individual can construct ideographic laws that are as valid as those of any other individual or culture.

While modernism and postmodernism rest on different assumptions about the nature of law, neither system necessarily requires the existence of God in the universe. Modernism's natural law seems to operate without God, and Bauman eloquently concludes that postmodernism's "deposition of universal reason did not reinstate a universal God" (p. xxiii). In contrast, what follows in this chapter presumes that the reader has a fundamental witness of the existence of God. If we believe that God exists as an actor in the universe, what, then, is the nature of law?

### **The Law to and from God**

It might comfort us if we could say that the law of the universe is God's will. However, that assertion seems to ignore God's own experience in the universe. Simply inserting God into the system does not resolve the dilemma between the modern and postmodern conceptions of law.

On the one hand, we claim, "As man is, God once was: As God is, man may be" (Smith, 1884, p. 46). We also read in *The King Follett Discourse* that "intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. . . . The first principles of man are self-existent with God" (Smith, 1983, p. 21). Self-existent principles are reminiscent of modernism's construct of natural laws. They exist independently of anyone's construction of them.

On the other hand, we read that God decrees laws. For example, Alma 41:8 reads, "Now, the decrees of God are unalterable," and D&C 130:20 states, "There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world." The relationship of God to law described in these scriptures is reminiscent of postmodernism, in which the individual constructs laws. Uncertainty about the nature of law, whether it is self-existent or constructed, seems to continue even when we consider God as an actor in the system.

The tension between these two conceptions of law is palpable within a single paragraph of *The King Follett Discourse*. Joseph Smith (1983) taught:

God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to

advance in knowledge. He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with himself, so that they might have one glory upon another. (pp. 21–22)

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In that single paragraph, law originates both outside of God and by God's decree. Obviously, if God finds himself in the midst of spirits and glory before he has decreed any laws or principles about how things work, law exists outside of him. Sequentially, however, he then decrees laws by which these coeternal self-existing spirits might progress and advance as he advanced. The laws that govern the existence of coeternal spirits arise outside of God, and the laws that God instituted for their advancement arise from inside God. Since law apparently originates both outside of God and inside God, there must be some way to reasonably order these processes and resolve the tension between these two conceptions of the origin of law.

### Reconceptualizing Infinity: Law > God > Law

One resolution to the dilemma hinges on a reconsideration of God and the concept of infinity. As long as our construction of God limits him to infinite knowledge and power, it hardly seems possible for law to originate both inside and outside of God. The solution hinges on our understanding of infinity. By traditional definitions, if God has infinite power and knowledge, then it is impossible for him to be contained in a system larger than his infinite self. However, if it can be shown that it is possible to conceive of an order that transcends infinity, then it is possible for God to have infinite knowledge and to simultaneously be held in a system larger than himself.

Sometimes words such as infinity do not mean what we think they mean. Sometimes long-accepted principles can be shown to not be necessarily true. For example, through revelation to Joseph Smith, the Lord corrected our understanding of the term *eternal punishment*:

Wherefore, I revoke not the judgements which I shall pass, but woes shall go forth, weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth. . . . Nevertheless, it is not written that there shall be no end to this torment, but it is written *endless torment*. Again it is written *eternal damnation*; wherefore it is more express than other scriptures, that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men,

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altogether for my name's glory. Wherefore, I will explain unto you this mystery. . . . For, behold, the mystery of godliness, how great is it! For, behold, I am endless, and the punishment which is given from my hand is endless punishment, for Endless is my name. Wherefore—Eternal punishment is God's punishment. Endless punishment is God's punishment. (D&C 19:5–12)

The clarification of the term *eternal* is very instructive. Because it is possible to reconsider the definition of certain attributes of God without being blasphemous, one wonders what other superlatives applied to God, such as the term *infinite*, might be misconceptions. Our common conception of the term *infinity* stems from Aristotle's pronouncement that infinity annihilates all other numbers. It is commonly taught that while  $(a + b) \geq a$  and  $(a + b) \geq b$ , any value added to infinity results differently such that  $(a + \infty) = \infty$  and  $(b + \infty) = \infty$ . Aristotle's concept of infinity may have compromised our understanding of God.

The nineteenth-century mathematician Georg Cantor demonstrated a model in which he showed, using the principles of set theory, that an ordered set can transcend infinity (Dauben, 1979; Lavine, 1994). A subsequent set can transcend that set, and so on. Cantor's work has come to be known as the model of transfinite numbers. Interestingly, Cantor conceived of each superseding set as existing on a different order. I believe Cantor's work is a key to resolving the tension between self-existent law and constructed law and the tension between God as a decreer of law and a discoverer of self-existent law.

Because we commonly assume that infinity annihilates all other numbers, we have limited God to mere infinite knowledge. If, as Cantor's work suggests, infinity can be enclosed by a transfinite set and that transfinite set can then be enclosed in a series of nested orders, then Joseph Smith's King Follett discourse makes perfect sense.

Given that construction, it is possible for God to have infinite knowledge such that he can decree laws for lower-order ecologies and still be held within a superseding ecology that is self-existent outside of him. One of the major themes of the temple endowment is that of succeeding orders of law, priesthood, light, and knowledge.



The organization of this earth, another major theme of the temple endowment, is very instructive. God took self-existing elements and organized them, by decree, into an earth. He did not create the earth out of nothing. (The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was apparently an adaptation designed to maintain consistency with Aristotle's conception of infinity.) Furthermore, God did not simply organize a barren earth; he organized an ecology. Three components define an ecology: organisms, environments, and the laws that govern their relationships. The process of organizing an ecology involves placing elements and organisms into relationships according to laws. It seems that in organizing this ecology, God selected self-existing matter and self-existing organisms and integrated them, by decree, into relationships according to self-existing laws that he learned by his own experience in the universe.

Each ecology has its own system of law. At the same time that God organizes one ecology of law, he is held by another ecology of law himself. That is exactly what Joseph Smith taught in the King Follett discourse. God found himself in the presence of other self-existent, coeternal, less-developed beings and saw fit to institute laws whereby they might progress as he had progressed.

Given that there are nested ecologies and that God exists in one of those ecologies that transcends infinity, he has superseding knowledge and power to organize lower-order ecologies. God can organize ecologies and spaces and earths and gardens for us.

### **The Universal Law and the Variable Ecologies**

There seems to be one law that suffuses all other ecologies—the law of justice. The law of justice states that for every behavior there is a consequence. We often think of the law of justice erroneously, interpreting justice as punishment for violating the law. A recent cartoon (“Pickles” by Brian Crane) captured that misconception cleverly. In the cartoon, a grandmother is scolding a grandfather in the presence of their grandson. She stomps away, saying, “Someday, Earl, you’re going to get your comeuppance.” The young boy asks his grandfather what “comeuppance” means. The grandfather explains that “comeuppance” means getting what you deserve for your behavior. The sweet little boy smiles and says, “I hope mine is ice cream.” The law of justice demands both payment

for sins and blessings for obedience. Some behaviors are associated with peace and ice cream, while some are associated with sorrow. However those behaviors and consequences may be set up in any particular ecology, they always follow the same regulatory pattern. While for every behavior there is a consequence, we also know that the consequences are not uniform across ecologies.

The restored gospel clearly teaches that there are variable conditions established in a plentitude of variable ecologies. By revelation, the Prophet Joseph taught:

All kingdoms have a law given; and there are many kingdoms; for there is no space in the which there is no kingdom; and there is no kingdom in which there is no space, either a greater or a lesser kingdom. And unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions. All beings who abide not in those conditions are not justified. (D&C 88:36–39)

In the same way that there are variable conditions across kingdoms, there are variable consequences across the variable ecologies' particular laws. The Prophet Joseph taught that “of him unto whom much is given much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation” (D&C 82:3). Clearly, if you live in a more-enlightened ecology and violate the demands of that ecology, you receive greater punishment than if you live in a less-enlightened ecology and are never aware of the ecological demands of a higher law. That concept has profound implications for Latter-day Saint therapists.

### **Adam and Eve's Experience**

When God organized the earth, he planted a garden eastward in Eden (Gen. 2:8). The Garden of Eden was a particular ecology that existed according to specific laws that applied only in the garden. Outside of the garden was a different ecology in which different laws applied. Adam and Eve were placed in the ecology of the garden. Examining their experience is instructive.

The garden Adam and Eve were placed in was a particular ecology with paradisiacal conditions. As long as Adam and Eve maintained the demands of the law—as long as they did not partake of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, certain conditions

held. There was no suffering. There was no death. Adam and Eve walked and talked with God. Food, if necessary, was readily available. There was no knowledge of good and evil. Neither were there children. Neither was there any human development. Those were the consequences of maintaining the ecological conditions of the Garden of Eden.

When they partook of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, consequences ensued and the ecology changed. In fact, we have the metaphor of being driven out of the garden—out of one ecology and into the ecology in which we, as their children, now exist. Suffering was present in the new ecology. Death was present. Adam and Eve were out of the immediate presence of God. They had bread by virtue of their labor. They also had children. They experienced increase, development, and knowledge of good and evil.

We often think of the Garden of Eden only in terms of its upside. We often think of our current ecology only in terms of its downside. In fact, there is an upside and a downside to each ecology. While Eden seems like stress-free living, it allowed no children, development, or knowledge of good and evil. While our current ecology seems to be filled with thorns, thistles, and universal death, it also allows the joy of children, development, and knowledge of good and evil. In each ecology, there are conditions and consequences that ensue according to the behavior of the actors in the ecology.

## Transgression

The Fall of Adam was a transgression. There are five Hebrew terms that are translated as *transgress*:

*chalaph*: to pass on quickly, to substitute, to change for better, to renew

*ma'al*: to act unfaithfully

*abar*: to cross over, to traverse

*pawsha*: to rebel or revolt

*raba'h*: to become great

The Pearl of Great Price presents the most robust record of Moses's account of the Fall of Adam. Adam and Eve were the first to use the term *transgression*. Unfortunately, we do not have Moses's original report of their statement to know which sense of *transgress*

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to use. Nevertheless, the term *transgress* can be seen as a crossing over or change from one ecology to another. In that sense, Adam's transgression was a crossing over.

While Adam and Eve may have had some vague sense of the benefits of the succeeding ecology, they did not fully understand the conditions and consequences of it. For example, they did not comprehend what death was. Learning about death was one of the first lessons about the new ecology. The Lord made coats of skins for them, which likely came from some animal that was sacrificed. I can imagine the shock Adam and Eve must have had as they witnessed the death of the beautiful creature who gave up its skin for them. Nevertheless, the skins were better than the fig-leaf clothing they fashioned for themselves. Their poor attempt to protect themselves was not as effective as being covered by the literal and metaphoric protection fashioned by God. When the Lord escorted them across the boundary from one ecology to the next, he said, "Cursed shall be the ground *for thy sake*" (Moses 4:23; italics added). This ecology is a good thing. It refines us.

After the Fall,

Adam blessed God and was filled, and began to prophesy concerning all the families of the earth, saying: Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God. And Eve, his wife, heard all these things and was glad, saying: Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient. (Moses 5:10–11)

They reflected that the crossing over was a good thing. They were aware, more than we, that both ecologies had an upside and a downside.

At this point, justice intersects with mercy. Adam and Eve understood that through the atonement of Jesus Christ and the mercy extended through his loving sacrifice all the families of the earth could eventually have the best of both ecologies. While Adam and Eve benefited from having their eyes opened, knowing good from evil, and having children, they were aware of their separation from God. Yet they had testimonies that through the Atonement,

they would be resurrected, see God in the flesh, have the joy of forgiveness, and eventually enjoy eternal life, which is a gift to those who conform to the laws of the celestial kingdom.

An exposition of the nature of mercy is beyond the ken of this chapter, but the interested reader is referred to Lehi's astounding discourse on the interplay among existence, agency, justice, and mercy; Amulek's sermon on justice and mercy; and Alma's instruction to his son regarding the relationship between justice and mercy. Significantly, Alma concluded that mercy cannot rob the eternal demands of justice. He stated that "mercy claimeth the penitent" (Alma 42:23). Repentance is the behavior required to obtain mercy. While resurrection is a free gift that demands nothing of us, exaltation requires conforming to the law of repentance. Can mercy rob justice? "Nay; not one whit," Alma warned (Alma 42:25). Even mercy operates according to the law of justice.

### **Ecologies of Law and Infinite Orders of Fullness**

Sections 76 and 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants illustrate an order of kingdoms, the telestial, terrestrial, and celestial, that are defined according to the laws that characterize those kingdoms. Regarding the nature of these kingdoms, a revelation given to Joseph Smith says:

Bodies who are of the celestial kingdom may possess it forever and ever; for, for this intent was it made and created, and for this intent are they sanctified. And they who are not sanctified through the law which I have given unto you, even the law of Christ, must inherit another kingdom, even that of a terrestrial kingdom, or that of a telestial kingdom. For he who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory. And he who cannot abide the law of a terrestrial kingdom cannot abide a terrestrial glory. And he who cannot abide the law of a telestial kingdom cannot abide a telestial glory. . . . Ye who are quickened by a portion of the celestial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness. And they who are quickened by a portion of the terrestrial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness. And also they who are quickened by a portion of the telestial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness. (D&C 88:20–26, 29–31)

These are the variable ecologies of law by which people can be justified. (*Justified* means to function within the strictures of the law of any given ecology.) One can choose, as an agent, to maintain the conditions of celestial laws and be justified. One can choose, as an agent, to maintain the conditions of terrestrial laws and be justified. There is no antipathy among the kingdoms. The kingdoms are not defined by who the King is. They all have the same King. They are defined by the variable laws and conditions that exist in them. Each kingdom represents an order of things, and in each order there is a fullness. The reconceptualization of infinity allows each order to be infinite and full. I think that God, knowing that his children would not all abide the demands of the celestial law, prepared kingdoms—ecologies of glory—for them. This is a uniquely Latter-day Saint concept and must be a foundation piece in any attempt to create a psychotherapy based on Latter-day Saint ideas.

### **Implication for Practice**

One implication of this tripartite conception of variable ecologies—(1) organisms (2) are in relationship with environments (3) according to variable laws—is in our approach to tolerance. Modernism’s focus on a unitary law led to an approach toward therapy in which professionals were expected, by virtue of their scientific knowledge, to cure people who were deviant from the norm. That model was an outgrowth of modernism’s assumption that there was a unitary natural law to which the scientist was privy and the lay person was not. Science was the authority that imposed the truth on the uneducated populace. That model led to abuse of people as it held little tolerance for deviance. The postmodern approach to tolerance emerged partly in reaction to such abuses.

The postmodern model of tolerance is essentially a horizontal model. Tolerance is enjoined toward all behaviors because all things are local and relative. There is no construct or behavior that has any particular value over another. A belief or behavior is upheld, not because of its truth value, but because of the political, economic, or military power behind it.

Neither the unitary vertical model of modernism nor the random horizontal model of postmodernism is workable. Latter-day Saint therapists often experience modernism’s model as judgmental

and postmodernism's model as a capitulation of truth. The model of law articulated in Doctrine and Covenants 88 avoids both errors.

The model of ecologies of law is a nested model that has consistency and variation across ecologies. It is neither vertical and unitary as in modernism nor random and horizontal as in postmodernism. In the Latter-day Saint model of law, there are more- and less-encompassing ecologies of law. In more-encompassing ecologies of law, the demands are greater, the blessings are greater, the punishments are greater, and the glory is greater.

This model of law allows the therapist to engage people where they are while simultaneously inviting them to a more adequate law. Because people are free to choose and can be justified living at the level of law that they choose, the model allows therapists to tolerate clients' choices to remain in any given ecology. Latter-day Saint therapists do not have to impose a belief system on anyone. They do have to be patient with themselves and others. Even if therapists are personally striving to meet the demands of a more-encompassing law, they do not have to impose that law on clients as the unitary best way to live. They can invite themselves and others to live the most adequate laws that they can abide. Neither do they have to assume that not striving to abide the celestial law necessarily leads to mental illness. It is possible for a person to be justified, happy, and healthy while fulfilling the demands of the telestial kingdom.

There is no antipathy among the kingdoms. In fact, each of the kingdoms enjoys the presence of a member of the Godhead. Speaking of the terrestrial kingdom, the Lord explained that souls who choose this ecology "receive of the presence of the Son, but not the fulness of the Father" (D&C 76:77). Speaking of the telestial kingdom, the Lord explained that "these are they who receive not of his [Jesus's] fulness in the eternal world, but of the Holy Spirit through the ministration of the terrestrial" (D&C 76:86). A member of the Godhead—God the Father, God the Son, or God the Spirit—ministers to each ecology.

Joseph Smith's bold redefinition of the term *eternal* along with his description of variable ecologies of law and the nature of God are uniquely Latter-day Saint concepts that must be foundation stones in the development of an LDS model of psychotherapy.

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