ON A PHILOSOPHY OF MARRIAGE

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Many have seen one or another movie or television version of the Frankenstein story. The first was made in 1910 and there have been many since. The Boris Karloff version of the Frankenstein monster has become iconic. Probably some have also read Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley's 1818 novel, *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*, from which those films are adapted. In the book, an Arctic explorer, Robert Walton, while stuck in the ice finds Victor Frankenstein traveling by sledge and takes him aboard ship. There Frankenstein tells his story: as a student overcome with a passion to know the secret of life, Frankenstein created a human body from various unrelated body parts and ultimately brought it to life with electricity, the modern, scientific fire. In horror, Frankenstein fled what he had done.

As those familiar with the story already know and even the first reader could probably have guessed, things do not go well afterward. The monster murders Victor's younger brother in a fit of rage at having been created as a lone being, a new but monstrous Adam for whom there is no Eve. He persuades Frankenstein to create a bride to repair his loneliness, but midway through the project Frankenstein again becomes horrified at what he is doing and destroys the potential second creation. In revenge, the monster kills one of Frankenstein's friends and, on Frankenstein's wedding night, kills Elizabeth, his bride and childhood friend. When the explorer, Walton, discovers the monster's creator, he has been searching for his monster in order to destroy him, but Frankenstein dies shortly after being found. After Frankenstein's death, Walton discovers the monster weeping over his creator's body. Then he wanders off into the ice of the Arctic to die.

The film versions of Shelley's novel are proof of the emotional and intellectual draw of this story. It isn't just a horror story. It is a story about us and our relationships, a story about humanity gone wrong that we find compelling. In the novel, the Frankenstein story is like a photographic negative. It is the reversed image of the story of human creation in Genesis. In it, Shelley shows us what modern individualism means. In Genesis, God, unlike Frankenstein, saw Man in the garden and recognized that it was not good—absolutely not good, the Hebrew tells us—for man to be alone.[1] As merely an individual and merely male, the being created was not yet fully human. So God created woman. The narrator of the Genesis story emphasizes that as a couple these two were not merely individuals. They were to be "one flesh."[2] In the Bible, human being is multiple rather than individual. To be human is to be in relationship. As a Latter-day Saint, thinking through the nature of human relationships seems particularly pressing given the eternal status we see in them.

In this essay, I want to do two things. First, I want to show how modern, Western culture is like Victor Frankenstein. Though not exclusively so, it is overwhelmingly individualistic and atomistic, believing that society and life are matters of bits and pieces put together. But Frankenstein discovered that he was wrong. Bits and pieces don't make a real human being, which brings me to my second point: a real human being is necessarily in relation to others. I will use several contemporary thinkers to show how relation with others can be conceived, though I will use them to argue that we are who we are only in relationship with other people and that the marriage relationship is the paradigm for all human relationships.

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1. Genesis 2:18. For a discussion of the negative prefix *lō'* (לֹא), see Harris R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1999), 463 (entry 1064).

2. Genesis 2:24.

The Modern Individual

A sea change in Western culture happened in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—modernism began. That has been a very good thing. It has given us science and technology. Without them, many of us would not be here, having died young of disease. We are certainly more comfortable and able to do more things more efficiently because of what modernism has bequeathed us. But modernism has not been an unalloyed good. With the good it also brought difficulties, most of which we don't recognize because they have become so seemingly natural to us. We breathe modernism's air without knowing it, so we do not notice that some of what it contains is not good for us. But for the last thirty years or more, philosophers have thought about the problems of modernism, and one of those problems is that in modern culture it is difficult for us to give a rational account of marriage.

That wasn't true prior to modernism. Ancient and medieval thinkers had philosophical resources for understanding marriage. To say that is not to approve of ancient and medieval views of marriage. After all, perhaps all of them dealt with marriage at least in part by refusing women the status of full persons. Instead, it is to say since ancient and medieval thinking about the metaphysics of persons was primarily relational,[3] in principle it could have accounted for marriage had those at the time recognized women as individual persons. On the other hand, though modernism—eventually—came to that recognition, it remained without the conceptual tools for understanding how genuine relationships between persons is possible. The further we come into the modern period, the more the philosophical norm is an atomistic individualism, and that individualism has made it difficult for marriage to be philosophically intelligible.

3. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is an important source for much of this thinking.

If we think of individuals as the building blocks from which relationships of any kind are formed, we can ask what it means that some individuals came together in marriage and then created a family. What are the ties that bind marriages and families? Since modernism assumes that individuals are the atoms from which any social order is created, our answer would ultimately have to be given in terms only of individuals. But that means that marriage would be a relationship constructed between individuals more or less by accident with no real being of its own except the kind of being that a contract has, a mutual agreement by which two parties bring something into being.[4] But it takes little reflection to recognize that marriage is more than a contract. It isn't just my wife, Janice, and I who make our marriage by our decision to be together. Being married has also made me. The same more obviously goes for the family. It cannot be reduced to decisions made by individuals. Marital and family ties are real, and they have real effects. So how do we account for marriage intellectually? My argument is that several thinkers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have provided alternatives that make a philosophy of marriage conceivable.

Seeing how recent philosophy understands relations between persons differently than modernism will require that we do a little history of philosophy. However, the limitations of a journal essay mean that I will have to ignore the nuances and exceptions that make history complicated (and interesting).

As always in Western philosophy, we begin with the Greeks. We can reasonably say that beginning with them and continuing through the late medieval period, the dominant way of thinking about persons was to see the individual as an aspect of an ordered cosmos. That didn't just mean seeing them as one entity surrounded by others in a universe of

4. Nathan B. Oman and Jonathan A. Stapley have written cogently about the difference between covenant and contract: Nathan B. Oman and Jonathan A. Stapley, "Covenant without Contract," in Nathan Oman, Rosalynde Welch, and Joseph Spencer, *Restoration Theology* (forthcoming).

things. It meant seeing them as part of a unity that is inherently ordered and beautiful at every level, social and physical.[5] In a mosaic, the whole is beautiful because each of the parts is in the right place, and each of the individual tiles has its significance in the mosaic because it occupies the place that it does. Ancient Greeks and others thought of the universe like that: each thing, including each person, had a place. To the degree that any particular thing or person lived up to what it was, it fit in the universe like a tile in a beautiful mosaic. Thus, the person's project as a human being was one of accommodating herself to the cosmic order, fitting herself into the beautiful whole. Since that cosmic order manifested itself in not only the physical but the social world, ethics meant understanding how to fit in with one's community and family.

In Aristotle, for example, the highest being is what he calls the *theos*. We translate that as "God," but he certainly didn't have in mind anything like what we would think of as God. For Aristotle, the theos was the purely intellectual being toward which all thought and action is directed in the long run. Ultimately, everything in the cosmos needed to be understood in terms of its relationship to the theos. Within that way of thinking, the person was understood in terms of his or her relationship to other persons, first the family, then the larger community, and finally the theos. Not everyone was an Aristotelian, but Aristotle's view is a good example of what an ancient ethical view looked like, and those ancient ways of understanding held sway for almost two thousand years.

However, the ancient understanding of ethics was among the things that changed rapidly and dramatically around the sixteenth century. As modernism developed, Western thinkers began to surrender the earlier view of the cosmos as an ordered whole—and with it the notion that

5. Rémi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003), offers an important exposition of the ancient notion of the cosmos and some of the implications of having lost that notion.

individual people were defined primarily in relationship to the whole of which they were part. Modernism, however, reversed the earlier way of understanding the world: instead of seeing the individual in light of the whole, modernism understood the whole atomistically. The individual is a part from which something else can be constructed. Persons are the basic social atoms, and the whole results from those being put together.

This reversal turned out to be monstrous, as it was for Victor Frankenstein. Prometheus stole fire from the gods as a gift to humans, a gift to make human life fully possible. But by starting with only bits and pieces and no attention to the whole of which they are a part, Frankenstein used the modern fire of electricity to give only regret, menace, and death rather than the gift of life.

We will see that as a result of the shift in understanding that came with modernism it became philosophically impossible to give an adequate account of how relationships between human beings themselves, as well as relations between human beings and the world, are possible. Having broken the connections between persons, philosophy had no conceptual tools by which it could reestablish them.

For almost one hundred years, the seventeenth-century French thinker René Descartes has been the whipping boy when discussing this and other problems of modern thought. I recognize that Descartes's work is more nuanced than those discussions usually portray it. Nevertheless, he so well characterizes the issues I will deal with that I too will use him as a whipping boy. We can see many of the problems of modernism by thinking about issues in Descartes's philosophy.

The reasonably well-founded cliché is that every college freshman knows Descartes's proposition *cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am." You find it on mugs and T-shirts. It is one of the things that beginning philosophy students like to argue about. Descartes was an important mathematician and scientist as well as a philosopher. He developed the first analytic geometry, making calculus possible, and he believed that all true knowledge could be tested using the method of geometric

proof. Proofs were part of Descartes's overall method, the "method of doubt." That doesn't mean that he genuinely doubted everything. Rather, Descartes used doubt as a way to find truth: doubt everything and then use geometric-style proofs to see what can withstand your doubts. What cannot be doubted because it can be proven is knowledge. Everything else is mere custom or opinion. And how does one prove what cannot be doubted? By beginning with an indubitable axiom—a basic, undeniable proposition—and building on that in steps that are also undeniable.[6]

For Descartes, the proposition "I think, therefore I am" was the axiom on which he could base all other knowledge. His point was that the proposition is axiomatic because I know I exist simply by the fact that I am thinking. I cannot think that I do not exist without contradicting myself. Thus, my certainty of self is fundamental, and the next question is "What else do I know certainly based on that axiom?" The answer is unclear because the rest of Descartes's proof that we can know the world depends on his proof that God exists. But few believe that proof works, meaning that the project to establish knowledge on an irrefutable ground fails. If we follow Descartes, I know that I exist, but I do not know about anything outside my own mind.

That philosophical problem has a variety of answers, perhaps most notably that of the German thinker Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century. But those answers don't concern us directly. I am more interested in the problems that Descartes's understanding of the self has created. Until relatively recently, few have thought about how, in spite of the problems with Descartes's project, the Cartesian ego, sure of itself and nothing else, has insinuated itself into so many nooks and crannies of Western thought. We very often think about the person as a Cartesian ego without knowing that we do or thinking about the consequences of doing so. With regard to marriage, however, that insinuation should be

6. I ignore the fact that mathematicians no longer believe that geometry is necessarily Euclidean geometry nor that that the latter's axioms are indubitable.

obvious: how can a Cartesian ego be related to another Cartesian ego at all, much less be part of a human family except, perhaps, by an act of will?

The first problem with the ego is its solitude. If we begin with a Cartesian ego, then we cannot explain how it is possible to recognize the existence of another person with a mind like mine, an ego that also says "I think, therefore I am." We can know our mental representations of other persons. I am having the experience here and now of seeing and hearing someone in front of me, so I know that I am having that experience. But that says something only about my mental experience, not about whether there really is a person in front of me. Obviously, I know that there are other people. But *how* do I know that?

Perhaps we know other minds by analogy: I am a person and this thing that appears in my representation of the world has many of the characteristics that I have, so I assume it is also a person. But if I understand the other person by analogy, then I am still talking about knowing my mental representations of them and not about knowing the persons themselves. It seems that we cannot know *them*. Kant later argued convincingly that Cartesian metaphysics and its heirs don't allow us to know *any* things in themselves, neither mere objects nor other persons (nor, it turns out, even ourselves). My argument is that Kant was right about Cartesianism, but it is nevertheless possible to know both others and objects as they are.

A second problem for the Cartesian ego is that Descartes relates the solitary ego to the world through the passions. He has separated the mind (or soul, which are synonyms for him) from the body. Mind and body, he says, are radically distinct. The difficulty of knowing the world arises from this radical distinction. Since the world and the body are material but the mind, or soul, is not, the connection of mind and the world is tenuous at best, for the mind can know itself but it is not clear how it can know something as radically different from it as the material world. As a result, Descartes understands the passions solely in terms

of mind. They are a kind of thought (though confused thought). The passions are mental representations, even if they arise from the influence of external events.[7]

This problem, namely Descartes's identification of the passions with the mind, means that—whether we are talking about erotic, family, or friendly love—all love is a form of self-love. For Descartes, self-love is the foundation for all emotions.[8] Even something like anger, Descartes tells us, is desire in combination with self-love.[9] This claim that all our passions are manifestations of self-love is relatively novel in the history of thought up to that time, but it has become a common assumption. It is not difficult to see the origins of much contemporary pop psychology in this Cartesian assumption. In any case, by looking at Descartes, we can see that in modernism the atomistic individual is at the center of not only the physical world but the social and emotional one as well.

If Descartes is right that love is a matter of will and representation, then the Cartesian ego wills to love its beloved, but what it loves is merely a representation of the beloved rather than the beloved itself because that is all the ego knows.[10] For Descartes and other early modern philosophers, "good" means "what I want," and he is willing to recognize the extreme to which that takes us. At best, human love relations amount to only self-gratification, my involvement with images in my mind. At worst, they amount to rape, my control and domination over that which I claim to love. Given this understanding of love, marital relations and the family can be no more than one more sphere in which the ego wreaks its will on what it represents.

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7. Rene Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, para. 17.

8. Jean-Luc Marion, *Cartesian Questions: Method and Metaphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 133.

9. Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, para. 199.

10. Marion, *Cartesian Questions*, 132.

This claim—that love is a matter of will and that the beloved is necessarily no more than an object of representation—is the most shocking. Without taking the time for the whys and wherefores, I note that Descartes explicitly says this understanding of love means that vainglory, greed, wine bibbing, rape, marital love, and parental love are all, essentially, the same![11] Presumably all that separates these forms of love from one another are the norms of society, in other words, convention.

It is no exaggeration to say that something like this Cartesian view of ethics and marriage invisibly undergirds most modern attempts to understand ourselves. But the relative invisibility of the Cartesian view does not mean that it is not there or that is does not have real effects. The common attempts to reduce our understanding of relations of married persons to the personal satisfaction of each party is but one of such attempts. The overall effect is that from a modern point of view, marriage is a sphere of will enacted on our representations and nothing more.

To recapitulate: In Descartes, the atomistic individualism of modernism makes itself apparent, separating the person from the world and from all others. Since Descartes's proof of God's existence fails, the Cartesian individual is even separated from God. In that separation of the self from everything else, the earlier notion of the person who is part of the whole becomes the modern notion of the independent individual, that which exists on its own. The person is sundered from the whole, from its place in an ordered cosmos. Indeed, the cosmos is no longer ordered. All is primal chaos, and the Spirit of God no longer hovers over it. Adrift in an ethically chaotic universe, the good can be no more than "the object of any man's appetite or desire,"[12] as the

11. Cited in Marion, *Cartesian Questions*, 134. Marion is referring to Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, sec. 82.

12. Hobbes, *Leviathan I*, 6. Cited in Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 143. Dupré's discussion of the shift from medieval to modern thought is excellent.

seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes describes it. If the ego, the I, is the foundation for our understanding of ourselves and the world, then in principle that ego is cut off from every other person as such. The only possible relationship of the individual ego to another person is representation. But that means that any relationship with another person is only a relation between the ego and itself (its representations) rather than a relationship with the other person herself. The solitary ego makes real love of someone other than oneself impossible.[13]

Of course, Descartes was not the only philosopher of modernism, and there has been additional thought about these issues in the last four hundred years. But as true as that is, it is also true that Descartes shows us the outlines and strong tendencies of modern thought, and those outlines and tendencies continue to haunt the ways in which we

13. Descartes suggests two ways of understanding the other person that might make human relation possible without making it merely a matter of will: (1) He sometimes speaks of the *alter ego* as a "free cause" (Marion, *Cartesian Questions*, 137). If the other person is, indeed, a free cause rather than something merely represented, then it might be possible to know such a free cause by analogy rather than representation, something I mentioned earlier. Perhaps a philosophy of love could be created on such a possibility, but it is not clear what an analogy not founded on representation would be. (2) When he speaks of charity, Descartes says that it is not a direct relation with another person but imitating the Augustinian epistemological tradition; he says that it is a relation mediated through God: "The other can be loved only if the *ego* gives up trying to represent it directly and accepts aiming for it indirectly through the unobjectifiable par excellence—that is, God" (Marion, *Cartesian Questions*, 138). In either case, however, though love is not reduced to a matter of representation (and, therefore, the beloved is not reduced to an object), we do not have a direct, concrete relation with the other person. In fact, in both cases representation still seems to be unavoidably foundational. But let us grant that perhaps one of these possibilities will escape my criticism. In that case, what we have is a merely spiritual love. So, for Descartes, in its worst case, love is rape and in its best case it is merely spiritual. Concrete, enfleshed love is impossible for the *ego cogito*.

experience and understand the world, often in spite of ourselves, usually without us knowing. We cannot escape the spectral presence of the individualism so clearly modeled in Descartes's thinking or the effects of that individualism, even though they are often all but invisible.

One of those effects is in the ways we think about our relationships with other people. For about two hundred years, the most influential version of ethics has probably been utilitarianism, in which "good" is defined as doing whatever will maximize my—or our—desires and pleasures as much as reasonably possible.[14] Given the individualistic metaphysics of modernism, perhaps no better ethics is possible, as unsatisfactory as that view of the world founded on self-love may be because it has little or no room for things such as oath, covenant, and obligation.

A Contemporary Alternative

My argument is that we find an answer to the problem of human relationships by rethinking ethics. We saw earlier that a version of my answer has been with us for millennia. Prior to modernism, ethics had been part of the larger project of ontology: the ultimate good was the attainment of completeness within and with the whole. The Greek word *ēthos* means "what is customary,"[15] and what is customary is determined by the place one holds in a culture and people. Based on that understanding of ethics as how one relates to the context one finds oneself in, we can construe the question of ethics for premoderns to have

14. Whether the pleasures are considered base or high differs from one person or group to another, but as Socrates argues in *Phaedo*, if the good is measured by pleasure, then in the end there is no difference between the most vulgar glutton and the most refined and spiritual saint, except that the saint can see further down the road than can the glutton. In that case, sin is only ignorance about what ultimately will give pleasure (Plato, *Phaedo* 69c–d).

15. Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), s.v. ἔθος.

been "What is our place in the cosmos (the ordered whole) and what does that require of us?" "Ethics" meant more than "morality," though morality was included. With the rise of modernism and the atomistic individual, as we have seen, it became impossible to find a place for individuals in the cosmos.

Just after the middle of the twentieth century, a French-Lithuanian philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, responded to the morally rudderless universe I have described by approaching it in a manner that reflected but did not duplicate the ancient approach to the question of human relationships. Levinas was hardly the first to do so, but he took a radically different approach than others by arguing that the basic assumptions of modern thought concerning the relationships between people are mistaken.[16] Levinas argued that in a world in which human beings are essentially independent from one another, meaning is impossible.[17] Even Frankenstein's monster is in relation with someone else, at least Victor Frankenstein, and his life is defined by that relationship. Levinas says that if an individual, a being more monstrous than that created by Frankenstein, were in principle independent of *all* other people, "thought would strike nothing substantial."[18] In other words, if I am truly completely independent, then there is nothing for me to think about because there is nothing to bridge the gap between me and other things. My mind cannot reach them. But we are not monsters cut off from all else. We have meaning, so there must be things other than

16. Levinas's criticisms of modernism make him one of the first so-called postmodern thinkers, as his influence on other late twentieth-century thinkers, such as Jacques Derrida, demonstrates. But Levinas did not use the label "postmodern" nor did he think of himself as part of a movement. The term "postmodern" is used in so many ways as to be almost useless.

17. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 55 and 93–94.

18. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 91.

myself and there must be that which makes relationship with them possible.

The last point is important, for it means that not only must there be something "out there" about which I can think, there must also be someone to whom I can communicate and a language through which the things that surround me in the world acquire being, in other words stability as a *this* or a *that*.[19] We can deal with the various things in the world, distinguishing one from the other and manipulating them as we do, because we have language that names them and allows us to put them in relation to other things. Language in its broadest and deepest sense gathers the world into a whole and allows us to live comfortably in that world. And we have language because we are in expressive relationships with other persons. The monster knew the world because he had language, and he had language because, presumably, Frankenstein taught him.

But language is neither mine nor yours. It is necessarily *ours*, and it comes before any one of us, always given to us by someone else. The idea of a fundamentally acosmic individual having meaning and thoughts is incoherent: for there to be meaning "it is necessary *already* to be for the other person . . . for the phenomenon of meaning . . . to arise."[20] The meanings I have, including the meaning of myself, presuppose that I am already in relationship with someone else, someone who has made those meanings possible.

19. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 139.

20. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 261; translation revised, italics added. Without another there would be no reason to represent. According to Levinas, Descartes has already made this point in the fourth meditation of *Meditations on First Philosophy* by arguing that the ego cogito only has knowledge of things external to it if there is a God (*Totality and Infinity*, 48–50). Levinas is arguing that the other person need not be God, but Descartes was right that another person—in whom a trace of God, the Being who is irreducibly independent from me though also in relation to me, shows itself—is necessary. "Irreducibly independent" is my way of reading Levinas's phrase "absolutely other."

In spite of that, given the powerful and pervasive role of language in knowledge and meaning, at first glance it seems that language traps us in our own representations and symbol systems and that we have no way out of them. I can know what I think. I can reflect on what I know, but it appears that I cannot get beyond my language and ideas to anything outside of my own mind. I can agree that the other person comes before me, but it seems that I cannot connect my mind to the other person herself. To quote Jacques Derrida's much misinterpreted and often abused phrase, it appears that "there is nothing outside the text."[21] I seem to be trapped in representation and language.

But that problem of being trapped in language, a variation on the problem of Cartesianism, is only apparent (both for Levinas and for Derrida). That is because, says Levinas, "society with the other person . . . is not constituted as the work of an I giving meaning."[22] Modern individualism assumes that I am the one who gives meaning in my relationships with others. But that assumption is false. *My relationship with the other person comes from that other person, not from me*. The language I have was given to me by another. I did not invent it. I must already be in contact with the other person if I can receive the language that she offers me.

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21. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 168. This is the book in which Derrida recognizes the debt of his thought to Levinas, a debt often unrecognized, especially by his early readers in the United States (47).

The point of Derrida's claim, by the way, is not that there are only texts, but that, though we can deal with only texts and text analogues—so that there seems to be nothing outside them—there is necessarily something more than any text, at least the event of referring itself, above and beyond the referent. For an excellent discussion of the point, see John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 1993), in particular 76–77.

22. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 261.

Stop for a moment to step back and think about the implications of this point that relationship, language, and meaning come from the other person rather than from me. Notice that in this view passivity—receptivity, being affected—rather than will or representation is at the heart of the human relation to the other person and the world. This is perhaps the most decisive difference between much of contemporary thought and thinkers like Hobbes and Descartes. For most modern thinkers, the fundamental characteristic of human being is will. But Levinas and others argue that it is receptivity, which necessarily implies relationship. Of course, human beings can will and act, but we do not understand the possibility of meaning if we reduce our relation to the world to that ability, ignoring our capacity to be acted upon, to receive. I do not know the world only because I have touched it in some way. I am not related to other persons because I create those relationships. I know the world and other people because they *first* touch me.[23] There is no question that the things I encounter in the world are only what they are—particular things like a podium or rather uncomfortable chairs in a lecture hall rather than an amorphous haze of raw sense experience—if they are ordered by the categories and relations of thought and language. But I have those categories and relations of thought and language only because I have been touched, as it were, by another person. The meaning of the world—its very being, in other words stability—is given to me by others.

We can say then that experience is a double passivity, a doubled receptivity: first, in that I am touched by the world in sensation and, second, in that I am touched by the other person in thought and

23. For an early and excellent discussion of this theme and particularly the theme as it relates to the touch of the other person, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 86, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). However, as the latter reference shows (187), Merleau-Ponty understands the touch-touching relationship asexually.

language. That double passivity is the first fact for understanding my being-in-the-world. Relationships with other persons come before meaning, and they are made possible by the touch of the world and the touch of the other person. Touch happens prior to the work of the ego's will and the mind's representations. I am not trapped inside my language or my mental representations because both are the result of relationships with other humans and relations with things.[24] Rather than what keep me locked inside myself, language and thought are what connect me to the world.

My argument, though abbreviated, will be that this priority of ethics, in other words of human relationships, and the double passivity of touch means that human relationships of every kind can best be understood from the paradigm of marriage and that marriage cannot be understood apart from oath.[25]

Against the background of this understanding of passivity and human being-in-the-world, Levinas's startling claim is that the erotic relation, which is the fundamental form of human relationship, gives rise to meaning.[26] For Levinas, the fundamental relationship with other people is erotic, but he is not using that term in the narrow sense of only sexual desire. Instead, like Plato, he uses the term to mean desire for what is beautiful and good as it shows itself in another person.[27] When

24. We see an early intimation of this idea in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by Joan Stambaugh and revised by Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 68–70, 133–135.

25. For a brilliant discussion of this claim, see Jean-Luc Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, translated by Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007). As will be obvious, my analysis depends heavily on that book.

26. Apropos of Levinas's discussion of eros, a great deal has been written about his understanding of the feminine, pro and con. I ignore that discussion here since I am interested in thinking about eros rather than in explicating Levinas. But critics have raised important questions about what Levinas's portrayal of the feminine implies for his ethical thinking as a whole.

27. See Plato, *Symposium*.

I am in a relationship with another person and I am attracted to beauty and goodness in her, I am in an erotic relationship, whether or not the relationship is sexual.

As with all relationships, in eros we find ourselves beyond ourselves in a relationship that comes *before* meaning rather than being reducible to representation (as it is in pornography) or being beyond meaning (where, as in naive Romanticism, love is reduced to mere mystery). Both the world and other persons are necessary to our experience, and we have experience because both are outside our minds. But our relationship with other persons is not like our relation to things. A loving caress is different than other kinds of touch and radically different than any grasp or attempt to gain possession or control.

For more than seventy years, philosophers have been writing about the caress. (Readers will probably not be surprised that most of those doing so have been French.) Perhaps one of the first was Jean-Paul Sartre, the existentialist thinker, who said, "Caresses are an appropriation of the other person. . . . The caress is not a simple touch, it is a shaping. In caressing the other person, I make her flesh come to life under my fingers."[28] For Sartre, the caress in any form is ultimately indistinguishable from the grooming of the pedophile. But Sartre is wrong, for he fails to recognize that a caress is not a directed act in which we take up an object in order to perform some task. It involves neither object nor task. I reach out for a hammer in order to pound a nail. I want to build something, to reach a goal. But when I caress my beloved, I am not achieving a purpose. In the caress neither my hand nor the caress is a tool. It is not part of a structure of ends and means. Neither is it an act of cognition: the I who caresses the beloved is not cognizing something. The lover is neither a Cartesian thinking thing nor a Sartrean sadomasochist. Touched by the beauty

28. Jean Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le neant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 440–441.

and goodness of the other person, the lover responds with the touch of a caress.

Strictly speaking, the caress itself is not meaningful because it does not represent anything. The caress comes before meaning in the relationship. But it *is* a response of one person to another. In the erotic touch, a lover addresses himself or herself directly to the other person rather than to the idea of the other person or to the feelings that one has about the other. If I strike my thumb with a hammer, I cry out. But that cry is not yet *about* anything. I am not yet making a statement, not even the statement "That hurt!" The cry is a response to one's relationship with things in the world, a precognitive expression of that relationship.

Similarly, the cries and caresses of love are not *about* anything. They are the acts of love rather than its content. Though without content, they address the loved one. It is significant that we say one *makes* rather than that one *means* love. Though caresses have no conceptual or linguistic content, they are expressive in that they, like the cry of pain, speak something. Namely, they speak the effect of the beloved on the lover, the precognitive relationship between the two. As an expression of relationship with another person, the caress shows the basis for the possibility of meaning: direct expressive contact with someone other than oneself is the ground from which meaning grows.

In contrast, because Descartes's atomistic I insists on beginning with self-certainty, knowledge of itself, it can find nothing—neither a person nor a thing—outside of or prior to itself. The only meaning it has is the empty "I think." Yet even Frankenstein's monster could do more than that. Analysis of the caress shows that meaning is possible because two things *are* prior to the individual ego: First, there is the caressing person, the acted-upon and acting me rather than the cogitizing I. The caressing person is not related to his *idea* of the beloved by the caress, but to the beloved herself. The relation of the caress is a relation of embodied touch, not thought, and it makes cognition possible. (I will use the word "flesh" to speak of this body so as to differentiate it from

the body as a merely material object, and by "flesh" I mean that which experiences, suffers, and enjoys.[29]) Flesh is necessarily material, but it is not reducible to its materiality.[30] In the caress we see that flesh and its life in the world among things and with others comes before reflective thought. The second thing that comes before the individual ego and makes meaning possible is the beloved with whom the caressing person is in a precognitive relationship.

Together, this touched and touching flesh and the other person in the relationship give me a self—a me—and an identity: I am the one in this relationship. But the me in this relationship is more than the Cartesian I that knows itself. I am not only a mind related to the world and others. In that I am affected by another whose beauty and goodness I desire and whom I caress, I am a body of flesh. The I that cognizes has come about as an aspect of my flesh and its being affected. The Cartesian ego is not as fundamental to my being as modernism would have us believe, but the living body is.

The fact that cognition is founded on our being affected, on ethical relationship, means that my experience of the other person as person is always what the contemporary thinker Jean-Luc Marion calls a "saturated phenomenon." That term isn't as mysterious as it might at first seem, for it means a phenomenon that is not reducible to its representational or conceptual content.[31] Examples are easy to come by. I stand

29. Cf. Michel Henry, *Incarnation. Une Philosophie de la Chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 27.

30. Cf. Henry, *Incarnation*.

31. Marion uses the term "saturated phenomenon" in contrast to Kant's notion of phenomena, which Marion describes as intuitionally poor: besides the intuitionally impoverished phenomena of the categories, there are some phenomena that are saturated, overflowing with intuition. Marion insists, in fact, that though we seldom recognize the saturated phenomenon, it is banal, commonplace. (See Jean-Luc Marion, "The Banality of Saturation," translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky, in *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion* [Notre

at the top of Kyhv Peak[32] looking out over Utah Valley and am in awe. I turn the corner in the Museum of Art and am overcome by a painting that I've never seen before. Sitting by Janice, she touches my hand, and I am suddenly overcome by emotion, a feeling of gratitude for grace as much as anything else. These are all experiences of saturated phenomena, experiences in which there is more in what I am experiencing than can be contained by any concept I might form in response to the event.

Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007], 383–418.) The encounter with the other person as other person is not the only instance of saturated phenomena.

Saturated phenomena fall into four categories: (1) the historical event (Marion sees the work of Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer [Chicago: U of Chicago, 1988] as explicating this kind of saturated phenomenon; see Jean-Luc Marion, *Given Being: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, translated by Jeffrey L. Koskey [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002], 229n84); (2) things such as paintings (see Jean-Luc Marion, *De Surcroît* [Paris: Presses Universitaires Françaises, 2001], especially chapters 3 and 5; see also Marion, *Given Being* 231n85—Derrida, he says, has explicated this kind of saturated phenomenon); (3) bodily affectivity (here the connection between Marion and Michel Henry is explicit; Marion, *Given Being*, 231n86); and (4) the look of the other person (Marion, *Given Being*, 228–234). See also Jean-Luc Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon," in *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion*, edited by James E. Faulconer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 87–105. Notice that Marion uses the word "event" to describe the first kind of saturated phenomenon, though he also understands each of these categories to be categories of events, happenings rather than atemporal things. As the name of the first category, the word "event" has its more ordinary signification, "that about which we can give a narrative."

Especially in works after *Being Given*, Marion sometimes adds a fifth category of saturated phenomena, God. I leave that out here since I am focusing on the banal instances of saturated phenomena. However, for more discussion of that possibility, see Brock Mason, unpublished honors thesis, Brigham Young University, April 2014, and James E. Faulconer, "The Transcendence of Flesh, Divine and Human," in *"To Seek the Law of the Lord": Essays in Honor of John W. Welch* (Provo: Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 113–134.

32. Until September 2022, Kyhv Peak was called "Squaw Peak." The name was changed to remove the ethnic slur "squaw."

The phenomenon of the other person whom I desire is such an experience. It overflows any concept I can have of her because there is more intuition in the experience than can be brought into that concept. Before going on, though, notice that "intuition" is a word that philosophers use differently than everyone else. As used here, intuition is the immediate apprehension of something by the senses. It is the experience of what William James described as the "great blooming, buzzing confusion"[33] of sense perception by itself, without the ordering provided by cognition. An intuition doesn't necessarily cause someone to have a thought, but it does give that person an experience. As a product of being affected by things other than oneself rather than a product of cognition, the intuition of the other person saturates my experience of her such that I cannot have an adequate concept of her. But not only is the other person whom I encounter more than I can think, I—myself as a living whole rather than a cogitizing ego—am more than I can think. I, too, am a saturated phenomenon because I too am largely the product of being affected, being created. There are saturated phenomena because I am not trapped inside my Cartesian "I think" and its language.

It would seem that this makes objectivity impossible, or at least not particularly important. It is tempting to think about saturated phenomena and wish that life were a never-ending experience of them. But like Alma, when we wish to escape from the ordinariness of life, we sin in our wish.[34] Though objective certainty requires "impoverished" rather than saturated intuition, it does not follow that objectivity is a bad thing. Indeed, it is essential. Without ordinary life and the objectivity that it requires, we would not be able to deal with our world effectively. Objective knowledge and certainty are tools we use to deal with James's "blooming, buzzing" world as we impose order on the world of

33. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890; repr. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 462.

34. Alma 29:1–3.

preconceptual experience. Nevertheless, what I can be objectively certain of when it comes to either myself or the other person is exactly the same as what I can be objectively certain of when it comes to any object: a representation. Certainty is a function of objectivity, and objectivity is possible only where we do not have a saturated intuition, but one in which the concept is adequate to the intuition, good enough for our needs. But we live in a world that exists prior to our conceptual organization of it, and we have experiences of that blooming and buzzing.[35] We can talk about our experience of things in themselves—experiences that occur in saturated phenomena—or we can talk about our experience of cognition and representation. And we must notice that the two are inseparably linked. In spite of that link, however, we make a category mistake if we use the methods and terms appropriate to one kind of experience to talk about the other. Looking for objective certainty regarding saturated phenomena would be such a mistake. The terms "certain" and "uncertain" simply don't apply, and this is true whether we are talking about loving relationships or about religious or aesthetic experience.

As I have already pointed out, experiences of saturated phenomena are not unusual. To say that a phenomenon is saturated is to imply that objective knowledge is not adequate to it, but this doesn't mean that it is not a genuine phenomenon or that that the thing that we encounter in the phenomenon isn't real. The experience of a saturated phenomenon isn't merely subjective. These experiences fall outside the subjective-objective dichotomy. It is also important to remember that being *more* than can be represented is not the same as being nonphenomenal, utterly unknowable, or not representable at all. Not all knowledge is certain knowledge, as biblical writers—who can, without euphemism,

35. I disagree with James, however, in that *confusion* is not always and perhaps even seldom the right word for what exceeds our conceptual grasp. To call the preconceptual "confusion" is to privilege conceptual order: it is only confusion from the point of view of a mind that organizes it.

speak of conjugal relations as knowledge[36]—have understood for millennia. What we learn in the experience of saturated phenomena is knowledge of what actually is. It is another kind of genuine knowledge.

Since the real, embodied, and living self is a saturated phenomenon, Descartes's mistake was to reduce self-knowledge to self-certainty. He confused the part of the self that says "I know" with the saturated self, which exceeds the conceptual grasp of that knowing ego. That reduction of the person to the ego is philosophically debilitating. As a Cartesian ego, I can have certainty that "I am" insofar as, and in the instant when, I think I am. I may always be implicitly thinking it in some sense. Thinking anything at all may carry with it the implicit thought "I am the one thinking this." But be that as it may, self-certainty is always only a matter of the present instant. "I am" means "I am right now." It carries no future guarantee. As a Cartesian ego, I can be certain of my present: I know I am right now. But I cannot know my future. I cannot know that I will continue to be after this instant.

The problem is that I want to have a future. In fact, I not only desire to continue to exist in the future, but (even more) I desire to have value. I want to know that that my continued existence is worth something. I want an answer to the question "Is my existence in vain?" In Marion's terms, "A quoi bon?" "What's the point?"[37] The merely Cartesian ego cannot but suspect that the answer to his question is "nothing." Frankenstein's individualistic monster can say "I am," but he cannot say "there is a reason for my continued existence." In fact, the tragedy of his creation is that there is no such reason.

If we understand a person to be an isolated, atomic Cartesian ego looking for certainty, then it seems that nothing can resist vanity.[38] Even what I know with certainty exists may exist in vain. So, to the

36. For one example, see Genesis 4:1.

37. Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 16.

38. Or "in-vain-ness," the negative answer to the foregoing questions.

question "What's the point?" implicitly Descartes and his heirs, like the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, answer "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity."[39] There is certainty only within the horizon of my present consciousness. I can always doubt the past or the future because they cannot be certain. So, as an "I think," I am only too aware of my humanity and its finitude; I am always capable of doubting the value and meaning of that humanity. Assurance that my life is not in vain requires an assurance that I can have value and meaning. For me to have value requires that that I can be other than I am. If my beloved cannot but love me and I her, then it makes little sense to say that I am loved and love. To desire a future—value and meaning—is therefore to live in a world of possibility, but a world of possibility is incompatible with certainty. How, then, is assurance of future value possible?

Ultimately whether I can be freed from vanity comes down to the question of whether anyone loves me, a question about physical and social relations as much or more than about psychological states. That is because though I can determine, on my own, the answer to the question "Do I exist?," I cannot answer the question "What's the point?" by myself.[40] Only another person can answer the question of whether my life is in vain, and the other person answers that question by loving me. But the person revealed in eros is not the Cartesian I, for that is an ego that masters, and the person in an erotic relation is, as it were, mastered. The me of eros is revealed—"opened"[41]—by someone other

39. Ecclesiastes 1:2. See also Ecclesiastes 8 and 9 where the point is made forcefully: nothing but the present is sure. The preacher was modern before his time.

40. A self-generated idea that I really do have a future, meaning, and value, that I can be otherwise, is impossible because if it comes from me, then it will be as fleeting and uncertain in every instant as the knowledge that "I am." For this reason, the assurance that things do matter, that there is an answer to the question "What good is it?" must come from outside me, outside my own consciousness.

41. Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 25.

than myself.[42] The Cartesian I wants to create knowledge and certainty, but a person doesn't create his or her own value. We *receive* our value from others. First comes love, the relation of love, not necessarily a particular emotion. That gives me value and knowledge of that value, though not certainty of it. Only on that foundation is certainty possible, a foundation in which I am touched by things and given language by others. Certainty is made possible by love, not the reverse.

Since the phenomenon of love is relational, it has two aspects, the lover and the beloved; I cannot, of myself, make it happen. A love relationship cannot be counted simply as one of *my* acts, nor is it merely something that happens to me. Love defies the simple categories of passive and active. Yet it is something real that occurs between persons. We can use Cartesian terms to describe an ordinary phenomenon: the person says "I am" and then "I have a mental representation of an object before me." But the lover does not say "I am" at all. If we speak of the caress in terms of language, we must say that instead of "I am," the lover, like the biblical prophets responding to God, says to the beloved "here I am," "behold me here." Obviously "here I am" signifies more than the spatial situation of the lover in the world. Such an announcement is a welcome; it says "please be my guest" (the literal meaning of the word *welcome*) or the even more prosaic "at your service."

However prosaic our welcome circumstances, and it must often be prosaic, "here I am" is also an oath, an oath to continue to be in this relationship. The prophet swears fealty with "here I am," and so does the lover. In a relation of faithfulness, the acts of love "do not say what they describe, they *make* what they say."[43] The acts of love make the oath of love, and they do so above and beyond the psychological state of the individuals who love. Without contradicting myself, I cannot say "I

42. It might be said here that one is revealed as oneself and to oneself in the act of being loved. Mattering to another assures me that I matter, that there is a point beyond me and things of my own making.

43. Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 147; italics added.

love you now but not later." To say "I love you" is to say "I love you now and in the future."[44] If I am in a relationship of love with another, then I have made an oath to continue in that relationship. I have promised to continue to say "here I am." My assurance of the future is found in that oath. The guarantee that the erotic phenomenon can continue comes in my faithfulness to the oath of love.[45] That faithfulness overcomes vanity by extending love into the future, beyond the ken of any mere Cartesian "I," who can say only "I am." What is the temporality of the erotic phenomenon? It is the extension into the future of faithfulness and its possibility rather than the moment in time of certainty. And the figure of that erotic temporality is eternity rather than mere time since the oath of love cannot envision an end.

As those in loving relationships discover, the intimacy of love is not something created by a single consciousness. More than once as a young man I fell in love—supposedly. I was enchanted by a young woman. It seemed that I thought about her all the time. I was flummoxed and my heart beat faster in her presence. I wanted to write poetry and, I'm embarrassed to say, I once or twice tried quite unsuccessfully. But merely having that emotional experience didn't mean that I was in love. I couldn't create love merely by feeling it or representing it to myself. I couldn't be in love merely by making her the object of my affection. Because in most cases, my interest in that person was probably not even known, much less returned, so the relationship wasn't love. If I was in love at all, it was with a representation of a woman, not the woman herself. Love requires two beings of living flesh, not just one mind.

That the event of love requires two persons means that the oath and future that the intimacy of love creates cannot be destroyed by the act of a single consciousness. The oath came about in a relationship to

44. Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon,* 185.

45. Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon,* 184.

another, not merely as something done by oneself. So if a lover denies his love and ceases to be faithful, it does not follow that the oath has been erased. To deny or try to destroy one's oath as an act of individual will is to be violent. It is to violate the person of the one to whom one has made the oath, as well as one's own person. That is because the value of the violator's future came about in the relationship created by the oath.

But, someone may object, what are we to make of the uncertainty of love? It takes very little reflection to remember that I cannot guarantee the faithfulness of my beloved. I cannot be certain that someone will continue to love me. Though love occurs only in a relationship, ultimately *I* must be the one who responds to the question "Does anyone love me?" Faced with uncertainty, I gain the assurance I sought by continuing to be faithful to the oath that I made in our relationship. Though the other person has made the oath possible by loving me, ultimately my value comes not from her but from the oath and the possibility of being faithful to it. Faithfulness opens the future that makes value possible.

The I seeks assurance that not everything is vanity. That assurance comes neither in certainty nor in the continued love of my beloved. It comes in my faithfulness to the oath I have made rather than in the beloved's faithfulness to me. I am a lover only to the degree that I make my oath and expose myself to the other person and the uncertainty explicit in that exposure. Rather than certainty, the assurance of love is that bequeathed by faithfulness to uncertainty, in other words by faithfulness to the future. For if the future were certain, it would not be a true future. Instead, it would be a not-yet-revealed present. It would be the way things necessarily are, already woven into the fabric of the present.

To a Christian, faithfulness to an oath in the face of uncertainty means hope. What is at stake in my resolve to keep this oath is not my self, not a Cartesian ego,[46] but my responsibility to my

46. Though, to repeat, in breaking an oath I put myself at risk since doing so is the negation of what guarantees my futurity.

beloved,[47] my responsibility to the oath I have made to the other person. At stake is my hope for our future. And I find surety—the answer to the question "What's the point?"—in that responsibility. I have loved and been loved, and I continue to love in faith and hope. The responsibility of being faithful, of continuing to love, has no end. Our erotic relationships must continually be remade. We must "carry the weight of the oath" of fidelity.[48] Love may be perfect—whole—but it is never finished.

It goes without saying that sexual love is not the only kind of love. Love relationships can take many forms: friend and friend, teacher and student, neighbor and neighbor, parent and child, husband and wife. Nevertheless, we can use marriage as a paradigm of all forms of love. Conjugal love gives life to flesh in two ways. The most obvious, perhaps, is that new life is produced through it, though the production of children is not the only goal of conjugal love; offspring are not the only possible way to make life abundant. Just as important, conjugal love gives me life as a human being. It gives me living flesh, making me a human being in relation with another human being.[49] Though Victor Frankenstein could give his creature a body, he could not put him into a human relationship. He could not give his creature human flesh, so he remained a monster who never had more than a representation of human life. Like Man alone in the Garden, the creature had a body that breathed and moved, but his condition was, as God but

47. This is Marion's account of the origin of ethics, for ethical obligation requires that I resist vanity, that I deny that human existence is useless (Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 26–27). I perform that resistance in my resolve to be faithful. It is also important to note that, according to Marion, the resolve for the responsibility to a beloved does not anticipate death as its end: "The future of the oath is not limited by death" (Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 192). Our rites for the dead, Latter-day Saint and otherwise, make this manifest. For Catholics and others, burying the dead is the seventh of the seven works of corporal mercy, another recognition that love does not anticipate death as its end.

48. Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 196.

49. Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*, 28.

not Frankenstein saw, not good. Adam's relationship to Eve gives him his flesh. Other forms of love also enliven my flesh. They too give me life as a human being. They too are a matter of oath. Ultimately, we understand love well with marriage as its model: people in an erotic and fecund relationship in which each is faithful to his or her oath.

Frankenstein's monster could not find love because he was merely an individual. He wanted to love Frankenstein but could not. He wanted a helper to stand before him[50] but could not find one. "The fallen angel becomes a malignant devil," he says, "yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am alone."[51] Though the creature seems to have felt something like the emotion that we identify with love, he did not have a love relationship. His monstrosity was a function of his individualistic existence. The result was tragedy, destruction for Frankenstein's friends and family, for his bride, and ultimately for both himself and his creature.

For Adam and Eve, however, the story is different. Adam's exclamation, "This now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh"[52] is presumably also Eve's. I read it also as an oath to continue to be with her, and I assume that she made the same oath, for "Adam knew his wife, and she bare unto him sons and daughters, and they began to multiply and replenish the earth."[53] Marriage, embodied and erotic, makes us human and is a paradigm for human sociality.

50. "A helper standing before, or opposite, him" is what Genesis 2:18 says literally.

51. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* or *The Modern Prometheus*, chapter 24.

52. Genesis 2:23.

53. Moses 5:2.

Author's Note

This is a somewhat revised version of an oral presentation for the 2014 Neal A. Maxwell Lecture (Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; November 18, 2014). Some of the internal rhetorical gestures are artifacts of that presentation.

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