


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## What could it mean to say that sex is eternal?

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### Abstract

This article takes up a philosophical examination of the Latter-day Saint theological conception of the eternal significance of sex. I first argue that the straightforward way of interpreting the theological claims about the eternal significance of sex appear to be incoherent. The main worry has to do with certain commitments Latter-day Saints take up with respect to the nature of disembodied spirits. Disembodied spirits don't have bodies. As such they lack the characteristic features of embodied things. And sex is as bodily a feature as any we confront in the course of our lives. I will argue that these conceptual obstacles can be overcome by attending to distinctive aspects of the Latter-day Saint conception of divine creation. Doing so offers an interesting alternative way of conceptualizing the essences of premortal (disembodied) spirits. In particular, it motivates explicating their essences in terms of what Plantinga calls world-indexed properties. With the explication in hand, I show that not only are charges of incoherence avoided, but the new perspective gives a unified account of a variety of apparently disparate aspects of Latter-day Saint theology.

**Keywords:** creation; Mormon; essence; modality; sex

### Introduction

Sex is a deeply significant feature of our embodiment and shapes our practical identities in thoroughgoing ways. But not only does it shape who we take ourselves to be in some deep practical sense, on many accounts of what it is to be a person, sex plays a crucial role in making us who we are in a metaphysical sense. This is on account of the role that sex plays in the story of each of our individual origins. If, as the origins essentialists maintain, my identity criteria are to be set out in terms of my material origins, then on certain accounts of what sex is, my having this particular sex will be essential to me. In addition to both the practical and metaphysical significance of sex, some religious traditions treat sex as theologically significant. Nowhere is this more clearly the case than in Latter-day Saint theology. In this theology, not only is sex a metaphysically significant feature of our present existence, its metaphysical significance bleeds across temporal boundaries into eternity.

The point of this article is to take up a philosophical examination of the Latter-day Saint theological conception of the eternal significance of sex. This project is urgent for the Latter-day Saint because the natural and straightforward way of interpreting their theological claims about the eternal significance of sex appear to be incoherent, as I will show. Philosophical work needs to be done to show that the theology is in good conceptual standing. The main worry for the straightforward treatment of these claims has

to do with certain commitments Latter-day Saints take up with respect to the nature of disembodied spirits. Disembodied spirits don't have *bodies*. As such they lack the characteristic features of embodied things. And sex is as bodily a feature as any we confront in the course of our lives. I will argue that these conceptual obstacles can be overcome by attending to distinctive aspects of the Latter-day Saint conception of divine creation. Doing so offers an interesting alternative way of conceptualizing the essences of premortal (disembodied) spirits. In particular, it motivates explicating their essences in terms of what Plantinga calls *world-indexed properties*.<sup>1</sup> With the explication in hand, I show that not only are charges of incoherence avoided, but the new perspective gives a unified account of a variety of apparently disparate and obscure (yet scripturally central) aspects of Latter-day Saint theology.

### The eternal significance of sex: a first pass

The most authoritative pronouncement in the Latter-day Saint tradition regarding the theological significance of sex can be found in a document called 'The Family: A Proclamation to the World' often colloquially called 'the Family Proclamation'.<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastical leaders have repeatedly emphasized the theological centrality of the document since its original publication in 1995. For example, Dallin Oaks, a member of the quorum of the 12 apostles made the following claim in 2017:

'I testify that the proclamation on the family is a statement of eternal truth, the will of the Lord for His children who seek eternal life. It has been the basis of Church teaching and practice for the last 22 years and will continue so for the future.'

Given the significance of the family proclamation for the tradition's teachings on sex, I begin my discussion there. What then does the family proclamation say about the eternal significance of sex? Here are the key passages from the text:

Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose. In the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshipped God as their Eternal Father and accepted His plan by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny as heirs of eternal life.<sup>3</sup>

Now it is important to observe that the text just presented uses the term 'gender' rather than 'sex'. In light of the various theoretical efforts of recent decades to establish a substantive distinction between sex and gender, why should we draw morals from the text about the eternal significance of sex rather than gender? Because on the official website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, they offer the following clarification with respect to the intended use of the term gender: 'The meaning of the word *gender* in the family proclamation is biological sex at birth.'<sup>4</sup> Given this interpretive clarification, it is clear that what is at issue from the perspective of Latter-day Saint theology is the eternal significance of biological sex (at birth). As such, in what follows, I will drop talk of 'gender' and instead talk in terms of 'biological sex' to maintain clarity throughout. Let's re-present the focal text with this clarification made explicit:

'[Biological sex] is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, purpose.'

The target question for this article is the following:

What could it mean to say that biological sex is an essential characteristic of premortal, mortal, and eternal identity (and purpose)?

Importantly, this article won't take up a sustained discussion of the nature of biological sex. Whether one holds the classical view, according to which the having of a sex is determined by whether one's reproductive system is organized around the production of either large or small gametes, or some alternative, it won't affect the account developed here.<sup>5</sup> As will become clear, we can remain agnostic about the details in the course of both recognizing the problems that the question raises as well as formulating an adequate solution for them. Before we set out the problems and work towards their solution, we first need to set out some theological preliminaries regarding what Latter-day Saints mean when they invoke language like 'premortal', 'mortal', and 'eternal.'

On the Latter-day Saint view, what are now human persons existed (in some respect) as persons prior to their earthly embodiments. These are standardly referred to as *spirits*.<sup>6</sup> Spirits are *pre-mortal* individuals in the following sense: they are created to be embodied but are importantly not yet embodied.<sup>7</sup> *Mortal* individuals are the familiar folks we all know and love: embodied spirits, that is, human persons. *Post-mortal* individuals are those who were once embodied yet died and as such are now again disembodied and reside in a transitory place called the spirit world. There they will await the resurrection where they take up glorified bodies for eternity.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the term *eternal* in this context typically signifies something eschatological in nature. Each of us is on a soteriologically significant journey through all these stages of existence, and this present stage (the mortal stage) – as the family proclamation notes – is a particularly central moment in a personal narrative arch spanning a variety of existential epochs. With the terminological preliminaries in play, we can set out the initial problem.

### Essential characteristics

The family proclamation maintains that biological sex at birth is an essential characteristic of pre-mortal, mortal, and eternal identity. How should we understand what an *essential characteristic* is? Some have argued that essential characteristics can be understood entirely in modal terms. On what we might call the modal view, essential characteristics just are the *de re* necessary features of an object.<sup>9</sup> In his pioneering work on essence, Kit Fine raised significant difficulties for modal accounts of essence and advanced an alternative non-modal approach which brought contemporary essentialists closer to an older Aristotelian notion of essence. According to Fine, statements of essence express non-modal truths which give a *real definition* of an entity or a plurality of entities; that is, it specifies *what it is to be* the entity or entities in question in a special definitional sense. The essential characteristics thus are the features an object has which play a role in making them the individual they are, and thus they individuate them.<sup>10</sup> Despite the notion of essence, on this account, being itself amodal, it does guarantee that essential characteristics have modal force. In particular the following will be true:

If being (an) F is an essential characteristic of x, then being (an) F is a necessary characteristic of x.

It's straightforward why this is the case. If an essential characteristic is a feature that plays a role in making you the thing that you are, then insofar as you are the thing that you are, you must have it, else you would be something else. What this means is that essential characteristics are related to a certain privileged class of *de re* necessary features of an object, namely those that are relevant to their real definition. This also gives us an actionable test for whether a certain feature is an essential feature of an object. If feature F fails to be a *de re* necessary feature of x, then F cannot be an essential feature of x.

### *The worry simply stated*

With these preliminaries in hand, we can now offer a first pass regimentation of the target claim from the family proclamation.

**Sex is Eternal (first pass):** Biological sexual feature F is an essential characteristic (and so a *de re* necessary feature of) premortal, mortal, and post-mortal individuals.

But by the lights of Latter-day Saint theology, this simply cannot be. It cannot be the case that premortal individuals have a biological sex essentially. This is because they cannot count as having a biological sex necessarily on account of failing to count as having a biological sex at all. Premortal individuals are disembodied. They lack a body. As such, they lack any of the features that make a particular body the body that it is. Given that biological sexual features play a role in making our human bodies the bodies that they are, disembodied spirits cannot count as having such features. This very same worry extends to the case of postmortal individuals: those who were once embodied but no longer are. The first pass account is incoherent. My project in what follows is to show how this obstacle can be overcome in a principled way, but first we need to appreciate some important ways in which this problem generalizes.

### *Generalizing the worry*

According to Latter-day Saint scripture, divine creation is a two-stage event. The initial stage is referred to as the *spiritual creation* and the subsequent stage is referred to as the *temporal creation*. The temporal creation is the creation of the material world as we encounter it: God's organization of the matter that constitutes the heaven and the earth (and along with it our material bodies). Thus, the spiritual creation is a creative event preceding what is ordinarily thought of when one thinks of divine creation. Representative scriptural passages include the following:

**Moses 3:4–5:** And now, behold, I say unto you, that these are the generations of the heaven and of the earth, when they were created, in the day that I, the Lord God, made the heaven and the earth, And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew. For I, the Lord God, created all things, of which I have spoken, spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth.

**D&C 29:31–32:** For by the power of my Spirit created I them; yea, all things both spiritual and temporal – First spiritual, secondly temporal, which is the beginning of my work; and again, first temporal, and secondly spiritual, which is the last of my work.

But the relationship between the spiritual creation and the temporal creation is much more interesting than one of mere temporal succession. Consider the following scripture:

**D&C 77:2:** ... that which is spiritual being in the likeness of that which is temporal; and that which is temporal being in the likeness of that which is spiritual; the spirit of man in the likeness of his person, as also the spirit of the beast, and every other creature which God has created.

Here we see clearly that there is a non-accidental relationship between how things are spiritually created and how they are temporally created. But what is it for them to 'be in the likeness of' one another?

Let's turn to representative theological glosses in the tradition to get a sense of how these scriptural passages have been received in the tradition. Each is from someone in an authoritative position in the tradition at the time the claim was made. Whether these count as authoritative instances of their speech is an interesting and complicated matter that we need not adjudicate. What is uncontroversial is that there is a stable reception of the following passages in the tradition by authoritative figures and that the following is a representative selection of such commentaries.

- (1) 'This earth was created first spiritually. It was a spirit earth. Nothing then lived on its face, nor was it designed that anything should. Then came the physical creation, the paradisiacal creation, the creation of the earth in the Edenic day and before the fall of man ... Man and all forms of life existed as spirit beings and entities before the foundations of this earth were laid. *There were spirit men and spirit beasts, spirit fowls and spirit fishes, spirit plants and spirit trees. Every creeping thing, every herb and shrub, every amoeba and tadpole, every elephant and dinosaur – all things – existed as spirits, as spirit beings, before they were placed naturally upon the earth*' (Bruce R. McConkie 1982, *The Millennial Messiah*, 642–43, emphasis mine).
- (2) '... all things were first created in the spirit existence in heaven before they were placed upon this earth' (Joseph Fielding Smith 1954, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:75–76).
- (3) '[Those in the spirit world] move with ease and like lightning ... If we want to behold Jerusalem as it was in the days of the Savior; or if we want to see the Garden of Eden as it was when created, there we are, and we see it as it existed spiritually, for it was created first spiritually and then temporally, and spiritually it still remains.' (Young 1925: 380, emphasis mine)

Interestingly this runs right into the problem that we articulated regarding biological sex in the previous section. How could there be spirit *fish* when to be fish is to be of a certain biological kind – to exhibit certain biological structures? How could there be a spirit *earth* if whatever it was, it was not yet constituted of iron, or rock, or any essential characteristics of a planet as we understand it? *Mutatis mutandis* for any of the relevant kinds invoked by the locution 'all things' above. What this makes clear is that there is something more general at stake from a Latter-day Saint theological point of view in making sense of the eternal significance of sex. What's at stake is a coherent general account of the nature of spiritual creation.<sup>11</sup> I think that we can give a coherent general account of the nature of spiritual creation if we understand the essence of what is spiritually created in terms of Plantinga's notion of a world-indexed property.

## World-indexed properties and premortal essences

### World-indexed properties as essential properties

A world-indexed property is just that – a property indexed to a world. Consider the property *wearing a blue shirt*. Compare with the property *wearing a blue shirt in the actual world*. The second property is a world-indexed property. The possible world relevant to the assessment of its truth is right there on the face of the property when its specified. Plantinga, in a variety of places, invokes world-indexed properties in the course of giving an account of individual essences. One of his motivations in accounting for essences in terms of world-indexed properties is that he thinks it allows the essentialist to solve thorny problems concerning trans-world identity, though these motivations don't concern us at present.<sup>12</sup> What is important for the present project is recognizing that world-indexed properties satisfy important desiderata concerning essential properties. Here is what Plantinga says on this point:

Consider the world-indexed property *being-wise-in- $\alpha$* , a property Socrates has just in case  $\alpha$  includes *Socrates' being wise*. Wisdom, of course, is a contingent property of Socrates, but *being wise in  $\alpha$*  is essential to him. While there are possible worlds in which Socrates exists but lacks wisdom, there are none in which he exists and lacks *being wise in  $\alpha$* . For (presuming that what is possible or necessary does not vary from world to world) there are no possible worlds in which  $\alpha$  does not include *Socrates' being wise*; hence there are no possible worlds in which Socrates exists but lacks the property *being wise-in- $\alpha$* . More generally, world-indexed properties are non-contingent: for any object  $x$  and world-indexed property  $P$ , either  $x$  has  $P$  essentially or  $x$  has the complement of  $P$  essentially.<sup>13</sup>

This meets our earlier test for identifying an essential property. Clearly world-indexed properties are *de re* necessary. Moreover, they play a properly individuating role. Socrates (and Socrates alone) has this particular collection of  $\alpha$ -indexed properties. World-indexed properties are thus good candidates for essential properties. Independent motivations for the world-indexed property account of essential properties aside, I think that such an account is exactly what the Latter-day Saint needs in order to articulate a plausible model of the spiritual creation. This opens the way to a plausible interpretation of the target claim in the family proclamation, and as we will see, offers a view that illuminates and unifies a variety of apparently disparate Latter-day Saint scriptural claims.

If we are to understand premortal essences in terms of world-indexed properties, we need to answer two questions: (1) 'which properties?' and (2) 'which world?'

The answers to these questions drop out naturally from a careful consideration of one of the most theologically significant narrative events in the Book of Mormon: the revelation of the premortal Christ to the brother of Jared.

### *Christ's premortal revelation as a template for specifying premortal essences*

For the unfamiliar reader, the Book of Mormon, like the Bible, contains many books, one of which is the Book of Ether. The Book of Ether chronicles the journey of a people called the Jaredites from the dispersion of people at the tower of Babel to a promised land. They are called the Jaredites on account of being descendants of their tribal leader Jared. His brother, referred to throughout the text of the Book of Ether as 'the brother of Jared', was the spiritual leader of the people and received a variety of revelations from God. The most important of the revelations given to the brother of Jared was precipitated by the need of his people to cross a vast ocean. In building the sea-faring vessels, the brother of Jared encountered a problem. If they sealed the vessels so as to be waterproof, they would have no way to illuminate their interior. They couldn't risk installing windows; that would compromise their waterproofing. They also couldn't risk using fire; the vessels were made of wood. The fire would compromise their integrity, and the smoke would suffocate the passengers. The brother of Jared's solution was to take a collection of smooth stones he had made up to the mountaintop and petition God to touch them so that they would become luminous.<sup>14</sup>

**Ether 3:4:** '... touch these stones, O Lord, with thy finger, and prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness; and they shall shine forth unto us in the vessels which we have prepared, that we may have light while we shall cross the sea'.

The narrative revelation of the premortal Christ begins at this moment when the brother of Jared petitions God to miraculously intervene to solve the Jaredite dilemma. Here are two pertinent verses:



**Ether 3:6:** ‘...when the brother of Jared had said these words, behold, the Lord stretched forth his hand and touched the stones one by one with his finger. *And the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord; and it was as the finger of a man, like unto flesh and blood;* and the brother of Jared fell down before the Lord, for he was struck with fear’ (emphasis mine).

**Ether 3:9:** ‘And the Lord said unto him: Because of thy faith *thou hast seen that I shall take upon me flesh and blood;* and never has man come before me with such exceeding faith as thou hast; for were it not so ye could not have seen my finger’ (emphasis mine).

Something very important to observe is that in seeing the premortal Christ’s finger, the text says that the brother of Jared sees that Christ ‘shall take upon [him] flesh and blood’. Why is that the case? That’s far from obvious. Why does seeing the Lord’s luminous spirit finger count as seeing some fact about the future: namely that he would become embodied? The world-indexed property account is going to be able to make immediate sense of this. But before we see how, let’s get the remaining cards on the table. The narrative continues with the brother of Jared requesting that Christ reveal himself more fully than just making his finger manifest.<sup>15</sup> The chapter continues with Christ giving the brother of Jared a revelation of his full person:

**Ether 3:13, 15–16:** ‘And when he had said these words, behold, the Lord showed himself unto him ... And never have I showed myself unto man whom I have created, for never has man believed in me as thou hast. Seest thou that ye are created after mine own image? Yea, even all men were created in the beginning after mine own image. *Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit;* and man have I created after the body of my spirit; *and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh.*’ (emphasis mine)

The body that Christ presents in revelation to the brother of Jared (his spirit body) is connected in some deep and significant way to his actual mortal body. Here is a philosophical moral that we can extract. We wanted to know which property was relevant to specifying premortal essences as well as which world they should be indexed to. The Book of Ether suggests that in encountering the premortal Christ, the brother of Jared sees something relevant to Christ’s having a particular sort of embodiment in the mortal world. This gives us insight into the premortal essence of Christ. Christ was slated for a very specific embodiment – being born in the particular time and circumstances he as a matter of fact was embodied. What the brother of Jared sees in seeing Christ is that Christ will be embodied in this manner in the mortal world. What this motivates is taking it the be a part of the essence of the premortal (spirit) Christ to be embodied in the particular manner he as a matter of fact was embodied in the mortal world. We can extract a general philosophical moral concerning the nature of premortal individuals. Which property is relevant to their essence? It’s the property of having a certain embodiment *E*. Which world serves as the relevant property index? It’s the mortal world. Call it world *m*.<sup>16</sup>

To help ourselves streamline expression of essentialist claims, we will adopt the Finean convention of expressing essentialist claims by means of a sentential operator.<sup>17</sup> On this view, expressing claims about essence involves prefixing an indexed sentential operator ‘it is essential to *x* that’ to a sentence. So, if we want to regiment the claim (say) that Socrates is essentially human, we first form the sentence ‘Socrates is human’ and then prefix an indexed operator ‘ $\Box_{\text{Socrates}}$ ’ to be read ‘it is essential Socrates that’ or ‘it is true in virtue of

the nature of Socrates that' yielding ' $\Box_{\text{Socrates}}$  Socrates is human.' With these conventions in hand, we can regiment the claims about Christ's premortal essence forthcoming from the account in Ether. Where 'C' is a name for the premortal Christ:

$\Box_C$  (C will be embodied in manner *E* in *m*)

where *E* is cashed out in the terms presented in the scriptural record. Importantly, this not only gives us a particular account of the essence of the premortal Christ, but it also yields us a procedure for specifying premortal essences in general: treat their premortal essences as involving the property of taking up a particular embodiment in *m*. Strongly generalizing from the above case yields the following principle: for any arbitrary premortal individual *x*, it will lie in their essence to take up a certain embodiment in *m*:

**Generalization (strong):**  $\Box_x$  (*x* will be embodied in manner *E* in *m*)

Now as a generalization, it's a bit too strong. It's simply false that it is essential to every premortal individual that they take up the particular embodiment that they as a matter of fact take up. That would mean that there is in principle no modal flexibility in the causal history of the world. But despite the fact that it fails to hold in every case, it doesn't mean that it does not hold in a profoundly rich number of cases. What is striking about the Latter-day Saint tradition is the extent to which it maintains that for a vast number of premortal individuals, God has fairly specific plans for their mortal embodiments. Concerning Joseph Smith, for example, there are explicit claims made about God planning to bring him into existence in the specific circumstances he as a matter of fact was. One particularly clear and representative expression of this is found in the Discourses of Brigham Young. Brigham Young states:

It was decreed in the counsels of eternity, long before the foundations of the earth were laid, that he, Joseph Smith, should be the man, in the last dispensation of this world, to bring forth the word of God to the people, and receive the fulness of the keys and power of the Priesthood of the Son of God.

The Lord had his eyes upon him, and upon his father, and upon his father's father, and upon their progenitors clear back to Abraham, and from Abraham to the flood, from the flood to Enoch, and from Enoch to Adam. He has watched that family and that blood as it has circulated from its fountain to the birth of that man. He was fore-ordained in eternity to preside over this last dispensation (Young 1925: 108).<sup>18</sup>

If this is right, we are entitled to strongly generalize for all premortal individuals who took up an embodiment in *m* that played a causally relevant role in the generation of Joseph Smith. But entitlements to generalize strongly don't stop there. D&C 138 explicitly contains the language of certain premortal individuals having their embodiments reserved for the present time.

**D&C 138:53, 55–56:** 'The Prophet Joseph Smith, and my father, Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and other choice spirits who were *reserved to come forth in the fulness of times* to take part in laying the foundations of the great Latter-day work ... they, with many others, received their first lessons in the



world of spirits and were *prepared to come forth in the due time of the Lord* to labor in his vineyard for the salvation of the souls of men' (emphasis mine).

What's more this exact language is frequently deployed in the context of addresses to the church by prophetic leaders in the tradition. See for example Ezra Taft Benson's (1977) address to the then youth of the church:

I want to talk to you, the young people of the Church, frankly and honestly ... You are not just ordinary young men and young women. You are choice spirits, *many of you having been held back in reserve ... to come forth in this day, at this time*, when the temptations, responsibilities, and opportunities are the very greatest. (emphasis mine)<sup>19</sup>

As recent as 2018 we find Russell M. Nelson (a current prophetic leader) again addressing the youth of the church claiming:

'My dear extraordinary youth, you were sent to earth *at this precise time*, the most crucial time in the history of the world, to help gather Israel' (emphasis mine).<sup>20</sup>

This is corroborated by an important Latter-day Saint religious practice, viz. receiving a patriarchal blessing, which is available to every member of the church. Patriarchal blessings frequently contain claims about what the individuals who receive them were foreordained to do. Why is this significant? Because as Haderlie and Miller have observed, Foreordination claims each have the following force. Where  $x$  variable ranging over rigid designators for embodied spirits (i.e., human persons):

**Foreordination:** if  $x$  is foreordained to  $\phi$ , God plans the world to be such that  $x$  can  $\phi$ .<sup>21</sup>

It's important to emphasize that the above principle only licenses an inference to a practical *possibility* rather than an inevitability. So, being foreordained to  $\phi$  only commits one to it being practically possible for that human person  $x$  to  $\phi$ . If a human person  $x$  was foreordained to  $\phi$ , then God will ensure that  $x$  exists, so as to make it possible for them to  $\phi$ . Thus, for that particular premortal individual, it is essential to them to take up a specific embodiment in  $m$ . All this taken together motivates the following claim found on the official website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: 'The doctrine of foreordination applies to all members of the Church, not just to the Savior and His prophets.'<sup>22</sup>

So, it is quite reasonable to think that very many presently existing and yet to exist human persons are foreordained to various ends. This introduces quite significant constraints on the unfolding of the history of our world. In fact, it entails that the causal history of the world can't have been very different than it actually is (or will be) if God's creative designs vis-à-vis the embodiments of premortal individuals is to be achieved. Afterall, if the history of the world had gone very differently, many of the human persons foreordained to various ends would not have come into existence.<sup>23</sup>

Since it is a pre-condition of God making those particular human persons that God embody the relevant spirit in the particular manner that God as a matter of fact has embodied them, for a surprisingly rich collection of premortal individuals it will be essential to them that they be embodied in  $m$  in the manner in which they as a matter of fact are, were, or will be. Even if we can't strongly generalize across the board, there is good reason to think that it holds for a surprisingly robust number of premortal individuals. But what

of those with flexible embodiments? How shall we understand their premortal essences? Simply take the disjunction of their possible embodiments as essential to them. Let  $E_1 - E_n$  represent the range of suitable embodiments for some premortal individual  $x$ :

**Generalization (weak):**  $\Box_x ((x \text{ will be embodied in manner } E_1 \text{ in } m) \text{ or } \dots \text{ or } (x \text{ will be embodied in manner } E_n \text{ in } m))$

What this means is that whether God's creative plans concerning the world involve an inflexible preference for the premortally existing part of your self's embodiment, or not, it is essential to the premortally existing part of you that it be embodied in some manner in the mortal world.

### Upshots

What our reflection on premortal essences has revealed is that our present embodiment is a part of our premortal essences. It is essential to all premortal individuals that they take up some embodiment  $E$  in  $m$ . But there is no way of being embodied in  $m$  without thereby coming to have a sex in  $m$ . Given that biological sex is a constitutive feature of being embodied, we can conclude that *having a biological sex in  $m$*  is a part of the essence of all premortal individuals.<sup>24</sup> With this in hand we can address our original question:

What could it mean to say that biological sex is an essential characteristic of premortal, mortal, and eternal identity (and purpose)?

The problem with the first pass account was that it tried to understand premortal individuals as having *premortally* sexes. But for the reasons presented above, that's wrongheaded. Rather, premortal individuals anticipate in their essences the sex they take up in being embodied in  $m$ . Recall that the text of the family proclamation reads as follows:

'[Biological sex] is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.'

On the world-indexed property account, this would be paraphrased as follows:

'[Biological sex in  $m$ ] is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.'

Given the considerations presented above, with respect to premortal individuals, this yields something entirely true by the lights of Latter-day Saint theology. It also clearly yields a truth for mortal individuals. What about post-mortal individuals and those who have passed on into eternity? In the case of post mortal (disembodied and not yet resurrected spirits) the account also issues a truth. When you die (and your spirit becomes again disembodied), you will have the following feature essentially: having had embodiment  $E$  in  $m$ . Thus, your essence will contain the feature of having had a particular sex in  $m$ . Furthermore, when you are resurrected – since this very body of yours is resurrected – it will be true of your eternal embodiment that it is essentially a *resurrection of embodiment  $E$  in  $m$* .<sup>25</sup> This means that the world-indexed property account is extensionally adequate. It renders a true judgment in all the cases relevant to the family proclamation and commits no category mistakes.

This account can now be extended to giving an adequate account of the spiritual creation. When the Latter-day Saint scriptures claim that 'the spirit of man in the likeness of his person, as also the spirit of the beast, and every other creature which God has created',

we now can state what the metaphysics presented here comes to. To say that the spirit of man is in the likeness of his person is to say that his person (which tracks his embodiment in  $m$ ) is essential to his spirit. When it generalizes to ‘the spirit of the beast’ or ‘every other creature which God has created’, it means that for any premortally existing individuals (here now ranging over in principle all relevant kinds and not restricted merely to spirits to be embodied as human persons) it is essential to them that they be embodied as a member of kind  $K$  in  $m$ . To say that ‘there were spirit men and spirit beasts, spirit fowls and spirit fishes, spirit plants and spirit trees, etc.,’ is just to state a general truth about spiritual creation as such. It is the creation of a thing whose future embodiment in  $m$  is essential to it. We are now in a position to state a general truth about the nature of all spiritually created things, to state as it were something essential to spiritual creation itself. It lies in the essence of spiritual creation that whatever is spiritually created is essentially such that it be embodied as a member of a particular kind (whether it be as a person, lion, tiger, bear, etc.,) in the mortal world. We can state this more perspicuously in the language of essence we have been deploying above. Where ‘SC’ is a rigid predicate designating the plurality of spiritually created individuals:

**Spiritual Creation:**  $\Box_{SC} \forall x(SC(x) \rightarrow \Box_x (x \text{ will be embodied as member of kind } K \text{ in } m))$

Latter-day Saints hold that this life is of deep practical and moral significance. The form of life one takes up in eternity hinges on the moral shape we give to our mortal lives. But what this reflection shows is that this life is just as much of an ontological fulcrum as it is a moral or practical one. Our premortal essences were pointed forward at our present embodiments. Our postmortal (and eternal) essences are pointed backwards towards it. And once we have this clearly in view, we see at once that there is a coherent conception of spiritual creation available for the Latter-day Saint which offers a sensible and coherent reading of the tradition’s teachings about the eternal significance of sex.

### A new worry

The present account, despite all its merits in addressing the present issue, does raise a complicated worry. Here I present the worry and sketch a strategy the proponent of the world-indexed property account might take up in attempting to respond to it. The worry involves scriptural claims about the rebellion of Satan and his angels prior to the creation of the world. The worry simply stated is this: on the present account, premortal existence is conflated with being spiritually created. On such an understanding, to say that Satan existed premortally is to say that Satan falls in the scope of the spiritual creation. But this leads to absurd results. Recall that truths about essence are necessary truths. We can articulate the relevant necessary truths by uniformly replacing our essentialist operators with necessity operators.<sup>26</sup> Thus our claim about the nature of spiritual creation above:

$\Box_{SC} \forall x(SC(x) \rightarrow \Box_x (x \text{ will be embodied as member of kind } K \text{ in } m))$

entails

$\Box \forall x(SC(x) \rightarrow \Box(x \text{ will be embodied as member of kind } K \text{ in } m)).$

Given a conflation of premortal existence with being spiritually created, we must acknowledge that  $SC(x)$  is true of Satan, but  $\Box(x \text{ will be embodied as member of kind } K \text{ in } m)$  is false of Satan. After all he was cast out of heaven and as a result has no mortal embodiment. If he doesn’t actually have a mortal embodiment, then *a fortiori* he cannot have one

necessarily. The most natural strategy for the defender of the world-indexed property to take up, it seems to me, is to find principled scriptural and theological grounds for introducing fine-grained distinctions into one's account of premortal existence which yield a principled exclusion of Satan and his ilk from the plurality of individuals designated by our rigid predicate 'SC(x)'.

Unfortunately, such a project cannot be fully taken up at present but let me point out two places in the Latter-day Saint scriptural corpus that suggests that such a strategy is worth taking seriously and is not absurd on its face. In D&C section 76, Joseph Smith reports a vision he had jointly with Sidney Rigdon which they describe as follows:

**D&C 76:12–13:** 'By the power of the Spirit our eyes were opened and our understandings were enlightened, so as to see and understand the things of God – Even those things which were from the beginning before the world was, which were ordained of the Father, through his Only Begotten Son, who was in the bosom of the Father, even from the beginning.'

The 'things which were from the beginning before the world was, which were ordained of the Father, through his Only Begotten Son' is what we have been discussing here as in scope of the spiritual creation. This component of the vision concludes in verse 23–24 with Joseph and Sidney hearing the voice of the Father establishing that 'by [Christ], and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God'. Importantly, however, verse 25 signals a break:

**D&C 76:25:** '*And this we saw also*, and bear record, that an angel of God who was in authority in the presence of God, who rebelled against the Only Begotten Son whom the Father loved and who was in the bosom of the Father, was thrust down from the presence of God and the Son ...' (emphasis mine).

I think it is natural here to see the text pointing at a shift in the content of the vision; that what is spoken of in verse 25 marks a break in the subject matter of the text. The juxtaposition of the two contents is exclusionary. The second is meant *not* to be included in the scope of the subject matter of the first. This reading isn't forced, but neither is it unnatural. In fact, it appears more natural in light of the creation mythology found in the text of Abraham. The book of Abraham chapters 4–5 recounts the two stages of creation discussed in the present paper. Importantly, they chronicle the detailed planning of the spiritual and temporal creation taken up by what the text identifies as the council of the Gods. What is striking here textually is that the myths recounting of the fall of Satan and his ilk occurs at the end of chapter 3; the chapter *prior* to the chapters which take up a presentation of the spiritual and temporal creation.<sup>27</sup> These taken together will not settle the question of whether Satan ought to be seen as excluded from the plurality of spiritually created individuals on scriptural grounds, but they do suggest reasons to be optimistic that the exclusionary strategy is provisionally viable and is at least worth a serious attempt at development.

## Conclusion

Latter-day Saints are not unique in acknowledging disembodied existence. Other theological traditions committed to similar positions may want to make sense of the eternal significance of sex (or any other feature of our present mode of existence). I have presented a philosophical model of how to do so. What I hope to have shown is that making sense of the eternal significance of sex is a weighty metaphysical matter, but that the tradition has the resources to mount a coherent picture despite any initial appearances to the contrary.

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## Notes

1. Plantinga (1979).
2. Given this colloquial convention, I will hereafter use ‘the family proclamation’ as an abbreviation throughout.
3. ‘Family: A Proclamation to the World.’ [1995]. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world?lang=eng>.
4. See [www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/counseling-resources/gender?lang=eng](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/counseling-resources/gender?lang=eng).
5. For good discussion of the motivations and challenges for the classical account of biological sex as well as discussion of plausible alternatives, see Franklin-Hall (2017).
6. Scriptural uses of the term ‘spirit’ to designate pre-embodied persons include Moses 3:4–9, Abraham 3:23.
7. See e.g., Moses 3, Abraham 3, and Fielding Smith (1953) 1:401.
8. See e.g., Alma 34:34, 40:7–14, 21. D&C 138:16 first introduces the language of the ‘spirit world’.
9. See e.g., Robertson, Ishii and Atkins (2023) and Cowling (2013) for discussions of the modal view.
10. See Fine (1994). For further development of this approach see Rosen (2015).
11. This becomes all the more pressing if one takes biological kinds to be natural kinds and the terms in our language designating natural kinds to be rigid designators. See e.g., Kripke (1980) and Hilary (1975) for canonical discussion of treating natural kinds terms as rigid designators. For critical commentary see Soames (2002). For good discussion of whether biological kinds (i.e., sexual kinds) should be treated as natural kinds see Franklin-Hall (2015).
12. See in particular Plantinga (1974). Something worth observing about Plantinga’s invocation of world-indexed properties to address the problem of trans-world identity is that it entails that being an individual is *not* a purely qualitative matter. For discussion of the problem of Transworld identity and how it makes trouble for certain kinds of essentialists see Chisholm (1967), and for critical discussion of the adequacy of Plantinga’s world-indexed property account for these issues, see e.g., Simon (1981) and Koslicki (2020).
13. Plantinga (1979) 141.
14. See Ether 2–3:4.
15. Ether 3:10.
16. One may wonder why we don’t just use the actual world as our world-index. Here I think it’s important that we introduce a rigid designator for the world under discussion so as to avoid certain difficulties that arise for appropriate treatments of the ‘actuality’ operator. There is considerable reason to think that the necessitation of actuality is invalid on certain appropriate modal frames: [Actually p] ∴ □[Actually p]. For exhaustive discussion of these issues see Davis (2015). We want a context invariant designator as a designator for our world of evaluation, so that we can uncontroversially vindicate necessitation, and sidestep any difficulties that the use of ‘actually’ may invoke.
17. Fine (1994, 1995).
18. Scriptural expressions of this sentiment can be found respectively in 2 Nephi 3:6–15, Moses 1:40–41, and perhaps most forcefully in D&C 86:8–11. For other contemporary expressions of this sentiment by authorities in the tradition, see also JD 21:316 and JD 24:187. Here I adopt the convention of using JD as an abbreviation for *Journal of Discourses*.
19. Benson (1977).
20. Nelson (n.d.).
21. Haderlie and Miller (2025).
22. [www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/foreordination?lang=eng](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/foreordination?lang=eng).
23. For more detailed discussion of the implications of the Latter-day Saint doctrine of foreordination for the causal history of the world see Haderlie and Miller (2025).
24. Any adequate account of the logic of essence will license the sort of definitional unpacking or expansion demonstrated here. Following Rosen, we can characterize this principle as follows. Where Def (F, Φ) represents the claim that F is really defined in terms of Φ:

**Definitional Expansion:** Def (F, Φ), and Def (G, ψ) then Def (F, Φ  $\psi/G$ ) where Φ  $\psi/G$  is the result of substituting ψ for G in Φ. Rosen (2015: 201).

**Definitional Expansion:** Def (F, Φ), and Def (G, ψ) then Def (F, Φ  $\psi/G$ ) where Φ  $\psi/G$  is the result of substituting ψ for G in Φ. Rosen (2015: 201).

See Rosen (2015) and Fine (2015) for discussion as to why we should accept substitution principles like this in essentialist or real definitional contexts.

25. For clear expression of the idea of the resurrection being a transformation of this very body in the tradition see Alma 11:43–45.
26. The general principle operating here is what Andreas Ditter calls the essence to necessity link. See Ditter (2022) for motivation and discussion. The interested reader may wonder what the present essentialist account means for the appropriate logic of metaphysical modality. Is the present modal metaphysics consistent with an S5 logic for metaphysical modality? Here the issues are delicate and unsettled, but I direct the interested reader to Salmon (1989), Teitel (2019); Ditter (2020) for rich discussion of this pressing question. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this question.
27. See Abraham 3: 26–28.

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