

A Latter-day Saint View of Free Will

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At the base of the Christian God's relationship with us humans are his will and ours:¹ commandments, obedience, and sin; blessing and punishment; repentance and forgiveness; rebellion and damnation; discipleship and salvation.² Personal moral responsibility underlies every Christian commandment, from choosing to reverence God through behaving charitably toward one's fellows to controlling one's thoughts. The necessity of free will to Christianity (at least in moral choices) is so fundamental that the Atonement of Christ whereby he redeems the

1. See Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 1986); see also Thomas Hobbes, "Of the Interior Beginnings of Voluntary Motions; Commonly Called the Passions; and the Speeches by Which They Are Expressed," in *Leviathan* (National Geographic Books, 2017); Keith Lehrer, "Freedom of Preference: A Defense of Compatibilism," *The Journal of Ethics* 20, no. 1 (2016): 35–46.

In this essay, "free will" refers to "libertarian" free will, the idea that humans have genuine ability to make choices independent of external influences. Libertarian free will stands in contrast to determinism, the idea that human choices are not free but rather are determined by external influences. Note that "compatibilist free will" is a form of determinism. Also called compatibilism or soft determinism, it is the idea that humans can make choices in accord with their preferences, but those preferences are determined by external influences.

2. See Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will* (Dover Publications, 2012); and Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Self and the Dramas of History," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*, ed. Elisabeth Sifton (Library of America, 2015), 847–67.

fallen penitent is meaningless without it.³ Imputing sin to humans who do not have free will is like imputing malice to a virus or hatred to a wildfire. Certainly, we can kill the germ or douse the fire, but just as certainly, we do not impute sin—willful rebellion against God—to either one. In just that way, the absence of moral agency collapses the concept of sin, which in turn obviates the Atonement of the Son of God.⁴

Christian predestinarian assertions in the tradition of John Calvin and others are thus shown to be at odds with the whole rationale for Christianity. Calvinist conceptions of the absolute sovereignty of God place us humans merely among his effects, thereby placing both credit and blame for our behavior on him—hence the “unconditional election” and “irresistible grace” of Calvinism.⁵ Salvation of the penitent and damnation of the rebel are thus predetermined by God’s inscrutable creation of some of us for joy and others for misery, and God sending his Son to die for the sins of the elect becomes an arbitrary filicide.⁶ Some have said God made us free, not evil.⁷ However, this helps not at all: as if cutting the strings of the marionettes somehow makes the puppeteer not the crafter of their every ability and their whole environment.

Thus, the question of whether we are morally free⁸ (and hence morally culpable) is so important that it cannot be ignored, and, indeed, it has not been. For thousands of years the human race has debated the nature of human agency. Aristotle, Paul the Apostle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, William James, and a host of others have considered the question at length.⁹ The trouble

3. See C. S. Lewis, *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (Harper Collins, 2001), 47–51, especially 47–48.

4. “If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. . . . And if these things are not there is no God” (2 Ne. 2:13). See also Leigh Vicens, “Christianity and the Problem of Free Will,” in *Cambridge Elements: The Problems of God* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), abstract.

5. Loraine Boettner, “Section I: Statement of the Doctrine,” and “Section II: The Five Points of Calvinism,” in *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Gideon House Books, 2017), 63–171.

6. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebeca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Beacon Press, 2001), 19.

7. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the Discourses*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (Everyman’s Library, 1993), 182–83.

8. See Sam Harris, *Free Will* (Simon & Schuster, 2012), 1.

9. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 42–51; Romans 8; Ephesians 1; Thomas Aquinas, “The Will of God,” in *Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the Dominican Province (Christian Classics, 1981), 1.19.10; David Hume, “Of Liberty and Necessity,” in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding; [with] Hume’s Abstract of A Treatise of*

is that no one seems to have laid it to rest. Hence, in this essay I propose to entirely reconceptualize free will via the Latter-day Saint canon.

This essay is mainly about one application of free will: moral agency. I use Kant's definition, the ability to freely choose between right and wrong that establishes moral culpability.¹⁰ While moral agency is a sub-type of free will, in this essay I follow Kant's lead: "A free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same."¹¹ That is, I do not emphasize a distinction that, though important and useful in many contexts, would distract from this essay's focus. I mainly use the term *free will* when referring to philosophy and *moral agency* when referring to scripture.

Centrality of Free Will in Latter-day Saint Scripture

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints joins other Christian sects in affirming our moral agency. In fact, the Church goes further, placing moral agency at the foundation of human happiness both in this mortal world and in eternity (see 2 Ne. 2:25; Alma 29:4). The Church characterizes earth's Creation, Adam and Eve's Fall, and Christ's Atonement as fundamental to the human condition because it is through them that individual moral agency that we mortals enjoy is created and maintained (see Gen. 1:26, Gen. 3:22, 2 Ne. 9:7–8; Moses 7:32–33). What then are Latter-day Saint doctrines of moral agency, and how do they compare with human experience and philosophic thought?

The unique Latter-day Saint conception of free will flows from a number of doctrines.¹² Central is the belief that each mortal is, at base,

Human Nature; [and] A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh, ed. Eric Steinberg, 2nd ed. (Hackett Publishing, 1993), §8; Immanuel Kant, "Transition from the Metaphysics of Morals to the Critique of Pure Practical Reason," in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 56–72; John Stuart Mill, "Chapter III: On Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being," in *On Liberty*, ed. Kathy Casey (Dover Publications, 2002), 46–62; William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 1–15. See also Robert Kane, *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011); Robert Kane, "Making Sense of a Free Will That Is Incompatible with Determinism: A Fourth Way Forward," *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research* 23, no. 3 (2021): 5–28.

10. Kant, "Transition from the Metaphysics of Morals," 52–66.

11. Kant, "Transition from the Metaphysics of Morals," 52.

12. I do not presume to speak for the Church; these thoughts are my own understanding of scripture. I look to God's living prophet to pronounce official doctrine (see D&C 1:24–28; D&C 21:1, 4–5; D&C 28:2, 5–7).

uncreated and eternal with a will that exists independent of God. To appreciate this and other Latter-day Saint contributions to the reconceptualization of free will, I discuss each word in the assertion “I can choose freely,” which contains and relates the core concepts in the debate.¹³

Latter-day Saint “I”

In Latter-day Saint thought, “I” is the self who chooses, a dual being of spirit and body created by God: “The spirit and the body are the soul of man” (D&C 88:15). At first glance, this appears consistent with typical definitions of the self.¹⁴ However, Latter-day Saint scripture adds three crucial distinctives to the conception of the self.

Entirely Material. First, “there is no such thing as immaterial matter” in the Latter-day Saint universe;¹⁵ “All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; We cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter” (D&C 131:7–8).

This is a complete departure from common conceptions of the self (a material body inhabited by an immaterial spirit) on which many people base their understanding of free will.¹⁶ This body-spirit dualism is important to such thinkers as the way to preserve a logical belief in free will. They see the material human body as bound by deterministic laws of nature and so hypothesize an immaterial spirit that is independent of those material laws.

Unfortunately for adherents of this view, this hypothesis raises two unanswerable questions. First, if the material world is disconnected from

13. This sentence is my own. I present it as containing and relating the core concepts of every extant approach to the debate: the nature of the chooser, the choosing, and the choice.

14. See René Descartes, “Meditation VI: Concerning the Existence of Material Things, and the Real Distinction Between Mind and Body,” *Meditations on First Philosophy: In Which the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body Are Demonstrated* (Hackett Publishing, 1993), 47–58.

15. See American Dictionary of the English Language, under “Immaterial” and “Matter,” accessed June 26, 2026, <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/immaterial> and <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/matter>; Isaac Newton, *The Principia: The Authoritative Translation and Guide: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, trans. I. Bernard Cohen, Anne Whitman, and Julia Budenz (University of California Press, 2016).

We may ask if the term *immaterial matter* meant to Joseph Smith what it means today. This is appropriate since many aspects of nineteenth-century Newtonian reality are now considered invalid. Fortunately, Webster’s 1828 American English definitions of *immaterial* and *matter* are functionally identical to those I use in this essay.

16. See Descartes, “Meditation VI,” 47–58; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (Project Gutenberg, 2004), 5.

our immaterial spirit, how can our immaterial spirit be connected to the material world, such as animating our body? Second, if our spirit is immaterial, how can we ascertain its existence—that is, what evidence of its existence can we ever find? Fortunately, these questions do not trouble Latter-day Saints because this material-immaterial split does not exist in Latter-day Saint doctrine. For Latter-day Saints, spirit is material the same as body, only finer and purer.¹⁷

Eternal “Intelligence.” The second distinctive Latter-day Saint belief regarding the self is that each God-created spirit is the habitation of an intelligence (Abr. 3:21–22)¹⁸ of “light and truth” (D&C 93:36) that was “not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29). So clear is this doctrine that it is thus unmistakably written: “Man was also in the beginning with God” (D&C 93:29).¹⁹ God is infinitely more powerful than us humans, but he is no older, for we are both eternal; thus “I,” in my essence, am coeternal with God, not created by him (see Abr. 3:18–19).²⁰ This is another radical departure from typical conceptions of the self as one of God’s *ex nihilo* creations.²¹

17. Doctrine and Covenants 29:34–35 makes this same point, though in reverse. Here God says, “All things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal; neither any man, nor the children of men; neither Adam, your father, whom I created. Behold, I gave unto him that he should be an agent unto himself.” This scripture rejects the material-immaterial split from the other direction, but whether everything is material or everything is spiritual, Latter-day Saint scripture rejects a fundamental difference in composition between spirit and matter.

18. I sympathize with those who find this a hard read. I believe its meaning becomes clear in the context of verses 23–26. In verse 23, Abraham notes that God “stood among those that were spirits.” Verse 24 describes “these” spirit children of God as being clothed in “these materials” (mortal bodies). In my view, then, “intelligences that were organized” in verse 22 must mean “intelligences that were organized into spirits.” Finally, this is the only way to make sense of the reference to first and second estates in verse 26.

19. See James E. Faulconer with Susannah Morrison, “The King Follet Discourse: Pinnacle or Peripheral?,” in “Yet to Be Revealed,” ed. Eric A. Eliason and Terryl L. Givens, special issue, *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 85–104. Here, Faulconer and Morrison trace evolution of this understanding over the century or so after the scripture was first given.

20. See David L. Paulsen, “Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2006): 192–93 with n. 51; James E. Faulconer, *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture* (Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 45, 50. I understand Paulsen’s position that intelligences are uncaused, uncreated, and eternal as consistent with my view. I also understand Faulconer’s emphasis on covenantal response in our lived (material) context offering similarly sympathetic grounds for identifying our intelligences as the fount of our free will, though he takes pains to point out that we have free will whether or not we articulate a cogent rationale for it.

21. See, for instance, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1.16.8–9, 1.18.1–4.

Innate Good and Evil. The third Latter-day Saint distinctive belief regarding the self is that each person's primal intelligence, each essential self, is innately inclined toward both good and evil. After Doctrine and Covenants 93:29 explains that intelligence "was not created or made" but is eternally self-existent, verses 30–31 explain that all intelligence "is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself. . . . Behold, here is the agency of man, and here is the condemnation of man because . . . they receive not the light." In other words, God empowers us intelligences to act for ourselves—not that he created our inclinations, only that he enables us to enact them—and we do not always incline toward the right.²² Similarly, Doctrine and Covenants 58:28 notes that "the power is in [humans], wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as [they] do good they shall in nowise lose their reward." We have the potential for agency innately within us—the power *is in* us, and we are agents *unto ourselves*. This is yet another departure from common conceptions of the self as totally depraved and incapable of choosing good.²³

For Latter-day Saints, then, each human self is at base (1) entirely material and thereby fully engaged with the material world, (2) eternally independent of God or anything else for its existence and will, and (3) innately inclined toward both good and evil.²⁴

22. To the age-old question of why God would thus unleash evil in the world, Latter-day Saint theodicy offers a uniquely satisfying answer: God empowers us to express our innate good and evil in order to develop us to our greatest eternal joy (see D&C 93:33–34; 88:29–33; 2 Ne. 2:25). Joy is a function of agency—without agency, there is no joy (2 Ne. 2:23; Mosiah 2:41; D&C 88:32–33). And since letting us express our innate nature means letting us choose to "take happiness in sin" (Morm. 2:13) as well as in virtue (Moses 7:32–33), God let his Beloved Son freely choose to atone for our evil choices (Abr. 3:27; Heb. 12:2; 2 Ne. 26:24) so that freeing us to exercise our moral agency would not doom us to "an endless duration" of corruption (2 Ne. 9:7). God's grace expressed through Christ's Atonement lovingly frees us from the damning consequences of our evil choices and magnifies the saving consequences of our good choices.

23. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.12–27; Boettner, *Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 63–82.

24. Since God revealed the existence of eternal intelligence/s, Latter-day Saint thinkers have speculated widely on its/their nature. To maintain focus I do not delve into that here, but I recommend the following to interested readers: Faulconer, *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture*; Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Deseret Book, 1976); Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Deseret Book, 1985); Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (University of Utah Press, 1974); Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Greg Kofford Books, 2001); Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, vol. 2, *The Problems of Theism and The Love of God* (Greg Kofford Books, 2006); Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, vol. 3, *Of God and Gods* (Greg Kofford Books, 2008); Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World;" David L. Paulsen, "Divine Determinateness and the Free-Will Defense," *Analysis* 41, no. 3 (1981): 150–53; Orson

Latter-day Saint “Can”

Latter-day Saint scripture agrees with common conceptions of “can” in the exercise of moral agency as denoting ability.²⁵ Consistent with this, philosophers generally agree that it entails awareness of options, capacity to act, and conscience.²⁶ To this, Latter-day Saint thought adds that, though all human destiny depends on the exercise of moral agency, yet we humans cannot independently generate options (see Moses 4, especially vv. 1–4). Rather, we must be attracted by competing alternatives that already exist in our environment: “It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. . . . Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other” (2 Ne. 2:11, 16). Thus, for Latter-day Saints, “can” is inextricably bound up in responding to external influences.²⁷ This contradicts Aristotelian conceptions of free will as based on independence from external influences.²⁸

Latter-day Saint “Choose”

Latter-day Saint thought is consistent with the typical view that to “choose” means to commit to one option from a group and includes intention to actually perform the choice.²⁹ The idea that a choice is not real until we commit to it emerges in such Latter-day Saint expressions as this often-quoted scripture: “Men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will” (D&C 58:27–28). Another influential Latter-day Saint scripture reads, “Except he shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing” (Moro. 7:6). Yet another illustrates the Church’s definition of choice as a duet of thought and action: Speaking of God’s

Pratt, *The Seer* (Seagull Book and Tape, 1993); Orson Pratt, “Great First Cause,” in *The Pamphlets of Orson Pratt*, ed. David Hammer (CreateSpace, 2017), 404–28; Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Wentworth Press, 2019); B. H. Roberts, “Immortality of Man,” *Improvement Era*, April 1907, 401–22; B. H. Roberts, “Intelligence or Mind and Minds,” in *The Truth, The Way, The Life*, 2nd ed. (BYU Studies, 1996), 164–73; Joseph Smith Jr., “The King Follett Sermon,” *Ensign*, April 1971, 12–17; May 1971, 13–17; John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology as Taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Hassell Street Press, 2021).

25. *Oxford English Dictionary*, under “can (v.1),” accessed January 28, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/can_v1?tab=meaning_and_use#10266561.

26. See Kant, “Transition from the Metaphysics of Morals,” 66–68.

27. Another implication of “can” is that not all choices need to be free for some choices to be free. To say “I can choose freely” implies that I may sometimes choose freely without necessarily always doing so. Thus, detractors of free will who show that one choice was made deterministically have not shown that all choices are the same.

28. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.2–5.

29. *Oxford English Dictionary*, under “choose (v.),” accessed April 29, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/choose_v?tab=meaning_and_use#9559999.

Final Judgment, a Book of Mormon prophet explains, “If their works were good in this life, and the desires of their hearts were good, . . . they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good” (Alma 41:3). Thus, choice is not choice for Latter-day Saints until it is desired, selected, and enacted.

However, expressing and committing does not mean there can be no purely internal choices. On the contrary, we have this from the Book of Mormon: “If we have hardened our hearts . . . we shall be condemned. For our words will condemn us, yea . . . our thoughts will also condemn us” (Alma 12:13–14). Thus, the Latter-day Saint canon asserts both the possibility and the virtue of controlling one’s thoughts. While the devil can tempt us with thoughts we would not conceive on our own, we are morally obligated to choose to dismiss them (2 Ne. 9:9; Mosiah 4:30).

Latter-day Saint “Freely”

We now see how heavily the first three words in “I can choose freely” influence our discussion of the fourth, “freely.” Integrating the foregoing and a host of other scriptures, I find that the Latter-day Saint canon defines choosing “freely” as the God-given ability to enact the self-existent, nonderivative will of our eternal, uncreated intelligence in our moral choices (see also 2 Ne. 2:11, 14–16; Moses 7:32–33; Abr. 3:24–25).

Complete Departure from Common Definition of Free Will

This is completely different from common definitions of free will.³⁰ Many (libertarian) free will advocates join Aristotle in defining choosing “freely” as choosing independently of influences external to the self. However, I (and others) see a fatal problem with this definition: If a choice is independent of external influences, the choice is by definition unconnected to those externalities.³¹ To admit any degree of connection is to admit that same degree of influence. How can we choose “freely” among (right and wrong) alternatives in our surroundings if our freedom is conditioned on disallowing influence from the very alternatives among which we are to choose? It is a logical contradiction; it is impossible.

30. See Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (MIT Press, 1990), 40–59. I perceive some distant similarity to Dreyfus's description of Heidegger's *eigentlich*, or “ownmost potentiality-for-Being,” but I do not believe *eigentlich* is a common conception of free will.

31. See Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Bradford Book, 1984), 23–29; see also Moritz Schlick, “When Is a Man Responsible?,” in *The Problem of Free Will: Selected Readings*, ed. Willard Van Orman Quine (Scribner's Sons, 1967).

Thankfully, the Latter-day Saint definition of “freely” that I give here not only dispenses with the material-immaterial split I described in the section above on intelligence; it also eliminates this contradiction between independence and connection.

Like God’s Freedom

At first glance, this definition of “freely” may appear so radical as to be entirely unique. However, it turns out that the great medieval scholastic Saint Thomas Aquinas defined God’s freedom in similar terms. God, he reasoned, is free not because he can choose independent of external influences but rather because he can act in complete accord with his own nature. Aquinas taught that God cannot sin, but this is not because he is not “free” to sin; rather, it is because the will to sin is not in his nature.³² Since God’s nature is self-existent and nonderivative (that is, not caused by any antecedent), acting in accord with his nature is the very quintessence of freedom. Aquinas does not speak for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but I find his explanation of divine agency consistent with Latter-day Saint scripture (see Deut. 32:4; Prov. 30:5; compare Matt. 5:48 with 3 Ne. 12:48; 2 Tim. 2:13; James 1:13; 1 Ne. 7:12; Mosiah 4:9; 5:2; Ether 3:4; D&C 61:1; 121:4; Abr. 3:17; and so forth).³³

Latter-day Saint Free Will Foundering?

Here is a distillation of the concepts undergirding the Latter-day Saint view of moral agency:

- I** the self, an uncreated, eternal, material intelligence with a self-existent, nonderivative will that includes innate good and evil inclinations; augmented by a God-given material spirit and further empowered by a God-given material body to interact with the entirely material world
- Can** the self’s awareness of options, the ability to enact them, perception of each option’s moral valence, and the inherent attraction of the self to various extant alternatives
- Choose** the self’s real commitment to perform one action in a group of alternatives
- Freely** the self’s God-given ability to express its self-existent, nonderivative will in its moral choices

32. Aquinas, “The Will of God,” in *Summa Theologica*, 1.19.10.

33. Finding truth in another faith tradition should not worry Latter-day Saints in the least since a tenet of our religion is that “the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8).

We now must consider a crucial question: Doesn't this definition of *freely* negate freedom in moral (and all other) choices? That is, haven't Latter-day Saints enmeshed the self entirely in material cause and effect? In effect, doesn't Latter-day Saint doctrine say that human choices are deterministic as in figure 1 below?³⁴

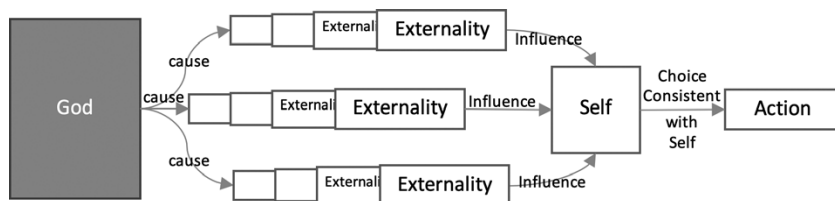


FIGURE 1. A(n inaccurate) view of Latter-day Saint determinism.

Self-Determinism

The answer to the above questions is, probably surprisingly to many, yes. Church scripture does place the self squarely in the material world and thus squarely in the cause-effect web of natural law along with everything else in the material world.

With one crucial difference.

Latter-day Saints understand our essential self, our intelligence, to be uncreated, eternal, and self-existent. To illustrate this, I offer in figure 2 the same diagram as in figure 1 but with a slight change.

34. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007); Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop* (Basic Books, 2007); John Jamieson Carswell Smart, "Sensations and Brain Processes," *Philosophical Review* 68, no. 2 (April 1959): 141–156; Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (1971): 5–20; Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (Shambhala, 1992); Gregg D. Caruso, *Free Will and Consciousness: A Determinist Account of the Illusion of Free Will* (Lexington Books, 2012); Marco Masi, "An Evidence-Based Critical Review of the Mind-Brain Identity Theory," in *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023), article 10641890, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1150605>, accessed September 15, 2025.

Figures 1 and 2 may appear simplistic since they do not explicitly reflect (1) implications of quantum uncertainty for free will and (2) emergent-materialist conceptions of the self. I grant that the figures are simple, but they do not prevent readers who wish to do so from understanding them in terms of quantum uncertainty and emergent materialism. Since complicating them would not further clarify my point, I believe the diagrams as-is are sufficient for my present purpose.

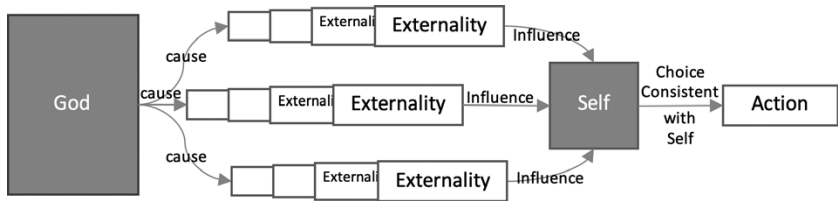


FIGURE 2. A(n accurate) view of Latter-day Saint determinism.

In this second figure, the self is the same color as God. This is to communicate that, as God is free by virtue of his ability to enact his self-existent, nonderivative will, so also each human is morally free: We can each make moral choices consistent with our self-existent, nonderivative will. To be sure, that ability is a gift from God: Being infinitely more powerful than any of us (or all of us together), he could run us like robots. But he loves us, and so he lets us express our essential selves. In fact, he has ordered the world to that very end (Mosiah 2:21; Alma 32:17–20).³⁵ And we do have essential selves to express.³⁶ Thus, while externalities in the material world do influence our choices, those externalities interact with our uncaused, primordial (material) intelligence. Our choices *are* determined, but the determinant is our *selves*.³⁷ What

35. Our wills are weak compared to God's all-powerful will (Job 38–41) and compared to the gargantuan forces of the cosmos in which we live (Ps. 8:3–4). Therefore, God delicately arranges our lives with enticements to good and evil that balance us on the razor's edge of our puny agency. This is why God is in the details of our lives—not to control us but to free us.

36. This is key to my thesis. It is why this is not just another form of compatibilism (apologies to Robson; see Kent E. Robson, "The Foundations of Freedom in Mormon Thought," *Sunstone* 7, no. 5 [September–October 1982]: 51–54). Compatibilists present free will as illusory because our choices ultimately boil down to triggers outside us; this Latter-day Saint view acknowledges free will as genuine, seated in our self-existent, nonderivative intelligence.

37. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, xxxi, 60–71; Plato, "Phaedo," in *Plato: Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, 2nd ed., trans. G. M. A. Grube (Hackett Publishing, 1997); Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane, J. Kemp (Digireads Publishing, 2021). Interestingly, none other than the great Immanuel Kant seems to have had a somewhat similar notion. He founded his argument for human moral agency on the existence of a "noumenal self" of the Platonic ideal sort for us "phenomenal selves" here in mundane reality. The problem with Kant's approach, as has been pointed out by minds brighter than mine (for example, Schopenhauer), is that he places the noumenal self outside the material world and so falls back into the trap of pitting free will against influence.

could be more free than such “self-determinism”? It is (nearly) the same kind of freedom God enjoys.

From Freedom of Choice to Freedom of Will

Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints clearly imply that we mortals enjoy the same type of moral agency as God: the ability to enact our will.³⁸ However, the standard works draw an all-important distinction between divine agency and mortal agency.

Mortal Agency Is Dependent

Mortal “man [cannot] act for himself save it should be that he [is] enticed . . . to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil” (2 Ne. 2:16, 27). We mortals must be presented with choices in order to exercise our agency. We are not able of ourselves to create the alternatives among which we choose. God presents us with alternatives that he lovingly customizes to fit each individual’s current state of agency.³⁹ (I will say more on this below.) We decide which most entices us within that set of God-given alternatives.

Divine Agency Is Independent

God’s agency is different in this respect from our mortal version: “There is nothing that the Lord thy God shall take in his heart to do but what he will do it” (Abr. 3:17). That is, God has the power to create whatever he chooses. God does not need externally provided alternatives as mortals do. He knows his will, and he enacts it. Being omnipotent and

38. I consider this one way in which human beings are created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27).

39. Second Nephi 2:24 shows that God’s wisdom permeates every aspect of creation, including the circumstances in which we mortals make our life choices; nothing is purposeless. Second Nephi 26:23–24 shows that all God’s work in the world is motivated by his love for us and is for our benefit. Alma 7:11–13 shows that God intimately mediates our mortal pains and sicknesses through Christ’s Atonement (and those who would limit Christ’s mercy and grace by defining “his people” as only the faithful should remember 2 Ne. 26:23–24.). Doctrine and Covenants 121:7, 25; and 122:7–9 show God lovingly, tenderly comforting and counseling one of his imperfect children, telling him that God is with him every step of the way. Alma 36:3 is a general statement extending to each of the faithful the intimate comfort God gives to one suffering servant in Doctrine and Covenants 121 and 122. Romans 8:28 is a clear, comprehensive statement that all things are woven by divine providence; this certainly includes the circumstances of our life choices.

omniscient, he does not consider alternatives as mortals do. We humans weigh externally provided opposition and alternatives through the lens of our limited awareness, but God simultaneously comprehends every alternative (D&C 38:1–2).⁴⁰

From Dependent Choice to Independent Will

As children of God, we have the potential to become like him (see Rom. 8:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:4; D&C 76:58–61; 132:19–20). To me, this means our agency can become like God’s. Here is one conception of how that happens. We start out not knowing our own minds or potential, so God, who does know our minds and potential, develops our self-awareness as we grow.

The Process. As his premortal spirit children, we were presented with two alternatives: agency through Jehovah or slavery through Lucifer (see Abr. 3:27–28). Everyone born into mortality chose agency, and because of this choice, we are said to have “[kept our] first estate” (Abr. 3:26). As infants newly born into our mortal “second estate” (Abr. 3:26), we are presented with the relatively small (but still enormous) set of choices regarding learning to use our bodies. As toddlers, we begin choosing in the larger context of imitating family members and interacting with toys and other objects in our home. Then our choices multiply again with neighbors, then church, then school. Then God gives our choices huge boosts with adolescence, adulthood, job, marriage, children. Then come old age, death, and the spirit world, each with its characteristic set of choices to help us identify our desires and develop awareness of our will.

And so it goes. God continually asks us what we want, what we really want, what we still want. The Book of Mormon puts it this way: God “granteth unto men according to their desire . . . decrees which are unalterable, according to their wills” (Alma 29:4). This even continues in the world of spirits after our mortal death: “The gospel [is] preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh but live according to God in the spirit” (1 Pet. 4:6; see also D&C 138:57–59).

40. This idea of God perfectly knowing his own mind extends to other divine attributes as well. For example, God does not exercise faith as mortals do. Mortal faith is born of uncertainty, but God suffers no uncertainty; he does not believe, trust, expect, hope, forecast, or guess as we mortals use those words because he knows everything. Another example is “trying.” Mortals attempt, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding. God does not attempt, he does; he always succeeds.

This proving and improving of our own desires comes to fruition in our resurrection when God fits us with a tailor-made immortal body exactly customized to do our will as developed and revealed to us in pre-mortality, mortality, and the spirit world: “I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts” and “ye shall receive your bodies, and your glory shall be that glory by which your bodies are quickened . . . to enjoy that which [ye] are willing to receive” (see Abr. 3:25; also compare Abr. 3:26 with D&C 88:28, 32; 93:36; 137:9).⁴¹

Our Potential. Some have wondered how God can nourish us to be more like him if our potential is delimited by our self-existent, nonderivative intelligence. That is, we may erroneously infer that uncreated intelligence is unmalleable intelligence. I do not know how God adds intelligence to intelligence, but latter-day scripture tells us that he can and has and does and will. Here are some examples:

“They who keep their first estate shall be added upon . . . and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever” (Abr. 3:26).

“The Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent . . . has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).

“He that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24).

“Ye who are quickened by a portion of the celestial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness. And they who are quickened by a portion of the terrestrial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness. And also they who are quickened by a portion of the telestial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness. And they who remain shall also be quickened; nevertheless, they shall return again to their own place, to enjoy that which they are willing to receive, because they were not willing to enjoy that which they might have received” (D&C 88:29–32).

“If . . . thine eye be single to the glory of God, thy whole body shall be full of light” (JST Matthew 6:22).

41. Note that our resurrected bodies will be exactly customized to do our will *in its full maturity through Christ's grace*: “Every man shall receive according to his own works, his own dominion, in the mansions which are prepared; And *they shall be servants of the Most High*” (D&C 76:111–12, emphasis added). God will not empower our “natural man” to forever remain “an enemy to God” (Mosiah 3:19, except see D&C 76:31–39 regarding the sons of perdition).

Latter-day Saint scripture thus clearly shows that one trait of human intelligence (that is, “the light of truth”) is that God can magnify it with additional intelligence (see D&C 93:29). Some of us accept these divine offers as King Benjamin’s people did (see Mosiah 1–6). However, the Book of Mormon joins the rest of holy writ in showing that the degree of acceptance varies widely.⁴² Thus the scriptures cited throughout this essay show that the “fulness” (potential) of additional intelligence, glory, light, truth, and joy each heart receives varies according to individual will (see also D&C 76:5–10, 16–17, 40–44, 50–89, 98–106, 109–12; 88:1–3, 21–24, 28–40).

Centrality of Christ’s Atonement

At the start of this article, I noted that determinism obviates Christ’s Atonement. This in turn undercuts the whole rationale for Christianity since there is no point in God commanding repentance or offering forgiveness for sins he predetermined we would commit. We must here ask, then, if Latter-day Saint self-determinism does the same thing. If our choices are determined by our eternal, uncreated, material intelligence’s nonderivative, self-existent will, what is the point of Christ’s Atonement? Doesn’t our uncreated, eternal nature immutably fix our eternal destiny?

Interactive Material Relationship

The answer to that question, probably surprisingly to many, is (partly) yes: Our self-existent, nonderivative wills do determine our choices. However, the answer does not end there. Being part of the material world, our self-existent, nonderivative wills interact with numerous external influences in determining those choices, and—thanks be to our (wholly material) Father in Heaven—central among those influences is the (wholly material) atoning Savior. “From all eternity to all eternity,” he exerts his redeeming and sanctifying influence upon us (Moses 6:67; Moses 4:2; John 1:1–5; D&C 19:1–4). He does this by innumerable means (D&C 88:7–13), four of the more prominent being the Light of Christ, the Spirit of the Lord, the scriptures, and the prophets (see D&C 93:2; 19:23–24; 130:23; Amos 3:7). Thus, it simply is not true that our eternal

42. See Jacob 5 for a graphic example of the variation in human responses to divine nurturing.

destiny would be the same with or without Christ. We might as well say the planets would move in their same orbits with or without the sun.

Internal, Not External, Determinism

There is yet more to the difference between typical determinism and Latter-day Saint self-determinism. The reason typical determinism obviates Christ's Atonement is not that it is deterministic, per se; after all, the prior paragraph about Christ's effect on our eternal destiny is just as true in typical determinism as it is in Latter-day Saint self-determinism. The difference is that in typical determinism, we are not our own determinant. An external determinant, God (or the universe or chance or the laws of physics or whatever), rules our destiny. His creation *ex nihilo* bakes into us our moral (and all other) choices. Christ comes, but our response to him is determined not by an independent will within us but by God, the Uncaused First Cause. In typical determinism, God alone is free; all else is predestined.

Latter-day Saint self-determinism undoes this by showing that the determinant of our choices is our selves. God, who could run us like robots but who lovingly lets us do our own will, gives his beloved Son for us to interact with, thereby freeing us from the otherwise damning effects of our baser natures so we can choose whatever degree of salvation we will (John 3:16–17; D&C 76:51–58, 74–79, 82–112, 31–38; 88:22–24; 138:58–59).⁴³ As Paul put it, “To will [good] is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do. . . . O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 7:18–19, 24–25).

Again, what Christ frees from sin and death is my very own, self-determined self—not a self determined by God or other outside forces.

Opportunity Versus Will

God adds upon each of us the glory each of us is willing to receive. God gives all his children the *opportunity* to receive exaltation; to do otherwise would be unjust. But that does not mean all his children have the *will* to

43. Just as God lets us mortals exercise our own wills, so he lets Jehovah exercise his own will (Abr. 3:27; D&C 93:10–13). That is, the Father did not force the Son into his mortal life; rather the Father freed the Son to live mortality in accord with the Son's own will (John 10:17–18; 2 Ne. 2:7).

receive exaltation; the existence of degrees of heavenly glory as described in Doctrine and Covenants 76:25–112 makes this abundantly clear. Doctrine and Covenants 88:28–32 makes the same point just as clearly and more succinctly.

Latter-day Saint doctrine is not universalist: Not every child of God will receive the same glory in the resurrection—each receives the glory she or he is “able to abide” (D&C 88:22–24; Morm. 9:4). The canon is clear on this. However, the canon is also clear that every child of God is capable of being glorified to some degree beyond his or her native state; each of us is capable of being “added upon with glory” (Abr. 3:26; Moses 4:2; 6:67; John 1:1–5; D&C 19:1–4; 19:23–24; 93:2; 130:23; Amos 3:7).

God Does Not Fail

Abraham 3:26 notes that God’s premortal spirit children who chose determinism through Lucifer do “not have glory in the same kingdom with those who” chose agency through Jehovah.⁴⁴ We mortal Christians often cluck our tongues and speak of these unembodied damned as God’s failures: “God lost a third part of his children in the war in heaven” or similar sentiments. However, Latter-day Saint self-determinism clarifies that God did not lose them. Rather, he empowered them to enact their self-existent, nonderivative wills to the end that they enjoy that which they are willing to receive (see D&C 88:28–32).

Grasping this is crucial because we hereby understand that God did not—does not—fail. Though the fate of Satan’s minions rightly horrifies us, they nevertheless used their God-given agency to obtain the “fulness” (D&C 88:29) of their will, all that they “are able to abide” (see D&C 88:22–24). And he is nurturing each of us to that same end: We, too, will each enjoy that which we are willing to receive. God does not fail; God *always* succeeds (D&C 3:1–2).⁴⁵

44. See also Moses 4:1–4, especially verses 3 and 4, for a contrast of Lucifer’s determinism and Jehovah’s agency.

45. In asserting that God always succeeds, Latter-day Saints find themselves in general agreement with Leibniz’s argument that this earth is “the best of all possible worlds,” though they might put it something like, “This earth is perfect for God’s purposes.” This stands in stark contrast to Voltaire’s picaresque mockery of that idea. G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E. M. Huggard (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), 228; Voltaire, *Candide* (Electronic Scholarly Publishing Project, 1998), <http://www.esp.org/books/voltaire/candide.pdf>.

Celestial Savior or Deist Watchmaker?

Another set of questions may arise when considering Latter-day Saint self-determinism: Can we rightly consider Christ our Savior and Redeemer if the plan of salvation is mechanistic? Where are the miracle of salvation and the love between Savior and saved? Doesn't Latter-day Saint self-determinism drop us into Matthew Tindal's lonely deism where God creates the universe, then turns away and lets it run?⁴⁶ As one friend put it to me, "How could God's loving plan of salvation turn out to be nothing but deterministic unfolding?"

Mere Mechanism?

This question relies for its impact on aesthetic connotation rather than analytic denotation.⁴⁷ That is, "mechanistic" conjures images of (ugly, even inhuman) cranking cogs, clanking levers, iron pistons, screeching steam, and oozing oil. Its actual meaning includes none of these things. "Mechanistic" means "relating to theories which explain phenomena in purely physical or deterministic terms."⁴⁸ This unabashedly does relate to Latter-day Saint self-determinism. We may be surprised, even shocked, by Latter-day Saint self-determinism. However, its initial strangeness does not mean it is ugly or inhuman. Indeed, I hope growing familiarity brings more and more gratitude for the release it gives from fatally flawed arguments we must otherwise rely on to make sense of our moral responsibility and the need for Christ's Atonement.

Miracles and Love Lost?

In a similarly aesthetic vein, some of us may wish for more miracles or love in the cosmos than we perceive in Latter-day Saint self-determinism. For us who long for "the God of the gaps," I point out that seating our choices within our eternal intelligence is plenty miraculous and lovely.⁴⁹

46. Matthew Tindal, "Chap. III. That the Perfection and Happiness of All Rational Beings, Supreme as Well as Subordinate, Consists in Living Up to the Dictates of Their Nature," in *Christianity as Old as the Creation: or, The Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London, 1732), 18–30.

47. I do not write this pejoratively. I willingly grant that the aesthetic appeal of an argument—how it "strikes me"—influences its cogency as well as does its logical validity.

48. Oxford English Dictionary, under "mechanistic (*adj.*)," accessed February 10, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1206576706>.

49. Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God* (Free Press, 2007), 93. Here Collins, a Christian and the former director of the Human Genome Project and the National

Where were our intelligences when God found us (see Abr. 3:21)? Are our intelligences eternally discrete entities, or are they plucked from an undifferentiated eternal mass (compare Abr. 3:21 with D&C 93:29)? Do nonhuman intelligences exist (see Moses 7:48–49)? Why did God love our undeveloped intelligences enough to decide to make our immortality and eternal life his work and glory (see Moses 1:39)? What is it about our intelligences that makes us capable of magnification and increasing joy (see 2 Ne. 2:25; D&C 93:33–34)? And on and on!⁵⁰

Self-Determinism and Deism

Some strains of Christianity conceive of God as deistically aloof, creating the universe akin to a complex clock that automatically runs without divine intervention after its initial creation.⁵¹ Deists thus assert the absence of recurring divine intervention in human affairs (or in anything else), but Latter-day scripture (and hence Latter-day Saint self-determinism) specifically asserts the opposite, positioning God as the ongoing, moment-to-moment enabler not only of human agency but of human life (see Mosiah 2:21).

Salvation Unfolding?

Continuing the appeal to aesthetics, my friend protested in dismay that God's loving plan of salvation could not be just an unfolding, every outcome known to God from the beginning. I reply simply, Why not? Do not we Latter-day Saints confess God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence? If so, how could his plan of salvation be otherwise? I submit this essay as evidence that surprise (or shock) at Latter-day Saint self-determinism is no rationale for rejecting it. On the contrary, I present Latter-day Saint self-determinism as arguably the consummate example that "mine house is a house of order, saith the Lord God" (D&C 132:8).⁵²

Institutes of Health, chronicles his ongoing awe at the wondrous miracles—the "gaps" as he calls them—of the human genome and other unanswered questions of science. Though he did not originate the term, Collins gladly acknowledges "the God of the gaps."

50. I did not make up these wonderful questions. Latter-day Saint thinkers have reasoned and dreamed about them and more since the nineteenth century. Note 24 lists some of these references.

51. Oxford English Dictionary, under "deism (*n.*)," accessed February 10, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/deism_n?tab=meaning_and_use#7235313.

52. Could there be a clearer statement than this of God's orderliness? See Genesis 1, as the entire chapter is about God organizing order from chaos. See also the repeated use of "organized" and "ordered" in Abraham 4:1, 7, 9, 11–12, 14–16, 18, 25, 27, 30–31. Isaiah

The word *unfolding* has too sterile an aesthetic for the beauty of Latter-day Saint self-determinism. To me it is the blooming and blossoming of your eternal self and mine into the full flower of our perfection under the loving hands of heavenly parents. Let us celebrate that beauty! Let us see Christ's invitation to "be ye therefore perfect" not as a daunting command so much as a comforting assurance, God's promise that he *will* bring us to become our truest, fullest selves (Matt. 5:48; see also the exquisitely nuanced 3 Ne. 12:48).

Conclusion

To sum up, then, Latter-day Saint scripture pertaining to questions of free will, moral agency, and personal responsibility transcends fruitless arguments by showing that they arise primarily from a mis-definition of the self. In the Latter-day Saint world, selves are essentially uncreated and eternal, added upon by a loving God "to act for themselves"—that is, to express their self-existent, nonderivative wills in God-curated moral (and other) choices (Abr. 3:26; 2 Ne. 2:26). Each of us is thus a tiny, God-beloved uncaused first cause in the image of the Great Uncaused First Cause. Latter-day Saints situate this self-as-free-agent within the cause-effect laws of the material world. Indeed, the Latter-day Saint standard works admit no other kind of world. This means the self is entirely relevant to and involved in both actions and consequences. In other words, we are affected by and have effect on the (entirely material) world. This material self-existence, coupled with God's loving willingness to let us enact our wills (within the protective embrace of Christ's Atonement), makes us morally culpable for the good and bad we choose.⁵³

As the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi concluded, "[We] are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or

48:3 shows that God has ordered the progression of history from its start to its end. Acts 2:23 shows that God planned and appointed both the trials of Christ and their eventual happy outcome. Romans 9:18–23, so often a proof-text for Calvinist-style determinism, appears via Latter-day Saint self-determinism in its true light as a straightforward statement that God honors our primordial natures. First Nephi 9:6 shows that God's omniscience and omnipotence—his orderliness, if you will—are absolute. Given this, how else could we mortals enjoy moral agency than by Latter-day Saint self-determinism? Abraham 2:8 shows that the whole history of creation from beginning to end was known to God before it started. This surely evidences divine orderliness. Doctrine and Covenants 38:1–2 shows that God knows everything everywhere all at once.

53. Luke 4:18–19. Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61:1–2 in his inaugural address to the Nazarenes. It is his mission statement, the thesis of his ministry, his promise to save us from ourselves. Marvelously, Mosiah 3:11, Alma 7:9–12, and other scriptures reveal that Christ also atones for the evil we *unwittingly* cause.

to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself. [Therefore,] look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit” (2 Ne. 2:27–28).⁵⁴

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54. Some may wonder why God would inspire Lehi (and every other prophet) to plead with us to choose Christ if we are just going to do what our self-existent, non-derivative wills determine we will do. But this is falling into the flawed thinking of herein-discredited misconceptions of free will. Remember we exist in the material world, affecting and being affected by it. This means externalities do influence our choices, and so (for instance) Lehi remonstrating with his sons (and us by extension) is entirely appropriate because it does affect them (and us). Exactly what that effect is, is a function of their (and our) self-existent, nonderivative wills.