

The Mormon Way of Knowing

Emotional experiences are inherently ambiguous. Alan Watts expressed this idea when he wrote that the emotions “clothe themselves in the symbols that lie most readily to hand.”¹ Experimental psychological research supports this conclusion, suggesting that the subjective meaning of an emotional experience is not an inherent property of the emotion, but is formed largely by the attributions and interpretations given to it.²

The Mormon way of knowing is based on ascribing meaning to ambiguous emotional experiences. Belief (“testimony”) is developed when an emotion, variously described as warmth, peace, comfort, or “burning in the bosom,” is given particular meanings. These meanings include attributions about the source, purpose and significance of the emotion that are not part of the original emotion, but are learned. For example, a warm and comforting feeling is hardly the equivalent of a message from heaven giving an affirmative answer to a specific recently pondered question. Yet in the Mormon way of knowing, nebulous emotional experiences are reliably recognized as having such concrete meanings. This process defines the Mormon way of knowing. The Mormon way of knowing excludes empirical and rational methods, as evidenced by how quickly its lip-service endorsement of these less biased approaches (e.g. encouragement to “study and question”) dissolves whenever there is an impasse with Mormon doctrine, at which point the Mormon way of knowing always in one way or another reasserts its exclusive epistemological sovereignty.

Where do these ambiguous emotions come from? Authentic “spiritual” feelings are naturally activated in response to many elements of Mormon culture (e.g. worship, communion, reflection, meditation, expressions of hope, gratitude, service, song, etc.). These feelings are not learned, but occur fairly predictably across cultures and religions in response to certain types of situations or cues. In the Mormon way of knowing, when one of these emotions is felt, it is associated with and interpreted in terms of the context and symbols of Mormon ideology, which begin to color and mold the meaning of the emotion. The emotion and its ascribed meanings are paired again and again until they are nearly indistinguishable, until the emotion practically assumes the form of its symbolic interpretation. The ambiguity of the original emotional experience becomes less and less apparent to both the individual and the culture as the process of ascribing meaning is individually and collectively rehearsed, as the learned associations between emotion and context (or reality and symbol) become strengthened. Soon the emotions clothe themselves quite automatically in the well-defined and ever-present symbols of Mormon culture. Once this occurs, feelings of empathy during church services are mistaken for a literal divine presence, and feelings of humility are mistaken for the voice of God whispering love and approval.

Over time, the symbols themselves can acquire the capacity to elicit the feelings (through associative learning), making the “truthfulness” of the ascribed meanings seem all the more self-evident. Testimonies are fervently defended as palpable and real, and as I have described, in some respects they are.

Although the Mormon way of knowing is a reliable way to produce fervent and heartfelt belief, it cannot distinguish truth from fiction. By interpreting universal human emotional experiences exclusively in terms of the symbols of a particular dogma, an individual is doomed to mistake what he learns to attach to an experience (ascribed meaning) for the experience itself (an ambiguous emotion). While this method may be adaptive in some instances, its efficiency in generating intense belief should not be confused with a capacity to generate accurate belief. In eschewing empirical and rational approaches to the development of belief, the Mormon way of knowing avoids vital checks and balances and instead relies on a “back door” to belief, exploiting a psychological blind-spot that readily infuses ambiguous emotion with concrete meaning until the ascribed meaning is confounded with the emotion it has commandeered.

Perhaps all spiritual or emotional experiences must take some concrete symbolic form in order to be comprehensible. But in my opinion, the critical question is this: does this occur because meaning actually resides in these symbols, or because human brains construct meaning out of ambiguity? I am willing to bet my salvation on the latter.

With due respect to Mormon family and friends, I believe that the Mormon way of knowing is a pathway to a fool’s paradise. Its validity is unquestioned within the Mormon culture, but to me the Mormon way of knowing is transparent, and the idea of trusting my personal beliefs to such an unsound method is absurd. Although the Mormon way of knowing may produce fervent belief and existential comfort among some, it cannot offer me something I find more valuable: a way of knowing that I can trust.

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¹ Alan Watts, *This Is It*, First Vintage Books Edition, April 1973, ISBN 0-394-71904-2, p 19

² Schachter, S., and Singer, J.S. (1962). Cognitive, social and physiological determinants of emotional state. *Psychological Review*, Vol 69, pp. 379-399.