

Perspective and Mormon Testimony

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Introduction

Perspective has become one of the most valuable things in my life. The more information to which I have access, the broader my perspective and the better the decisions I seem able to make. The purpose of this essay is to explore the relationship between the healthy perspective broadening process and the formation and maintenance of a typical Mormon testimony.

Pattern Finding and Perspective

I am part way through James Watson's "DNA: The Secret of Life" for the second time. It is a fascinating and easily understandable book written for a lay audience. In describing the origins of genetic science, Watson tells the story of Gregor Mendel, a Catholic priest living in the mid-1800s. Mendel was trained as a physicist, and began dabbling in biology. He noticed that peas had different characteristics in terms of the color of their flowers (green or white) and the nature of the skin surface (wrinkled or smooth) and wondered why.

Watson says that biological research up to that point was mostly limited to observation and description. Mendel, with his physicist's quantitative orientation, was inclined to try to measure what he saw and look for causal relationships. So he began planting peas, and keeping track of which seeds produced which peas, and after a number of growing seasons the data he collected showed clear patterns that led him to infer the cause and effect relationship between parental traits and inherited characteristics that eventually gave birth to the modern science of genetics. Ironically, he published a paper that clearly outlined these important insights, and the scientific community ignored him for over thirty years. He is a posthumous hero who lived in obscurity because his use of quantitative research methods in a setting that was traditionally non-quantitative put him so far ahead of his scientific colleagues that he was speaking a foreign language as far as they were concerned.

The important point for me is that prior to Mendel, generations of the world's best biologists had been blind to the patterns he identified because they had not collected sufficient data, and so their perspective was cripplingly limited as far as understanding pea genetics was concerned. That is, the data that is apparent to us as we look at a field of peas, or eat peas, or even remember all of the peas and pea fields we have ever seen, is inadequate to disclose these patterns to us. Similarly, when we look at the night sky, we are incapable of seeing the patterns the Hubble telescope will disclose. It is no more than a data collection device.

As I read about sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, I see the same process at work. Much of Bourdieu's research attempts to explain what he calls the "misrecognition" of

culture. He says that culture dictates much of what we do, think and are, while the reality of its effects upon us are as undetected by those who are subject to it as were Mendel's patterns of pea genealogy. For example, in one of Bourdieu's his studies he collected data respecting the exchange of gifts over periods of time in a culture that did not have a market exchange mechanism, and was able to show that the distribution of goods and services that in most cultures is performed by a barter or some other market function were in this society performed by "free will" gifts. The members of the society assured him that they had no obligation to give anyone anything. However, over time the "statistical regularity" of the gifting behaviour illustrated that something more than free will motivated their behaviour, and that whatever this was, it was shielded from their individual and collective view. The statistical regularity noted by Bourdieu is nothing more than the kind of pattern in data that enlightened Mendel. And as is so often the case, the key to seeing these patterns was the collection of large volumes of data over a long period of time. Casual human observation cannot perform this task. Hence, the patterns are not noticed until pointed out. Then, they are often easy to verify, and seem "sensible" to most objective observers.

Bourdieu says that unconsciously, for the most part, we participate in an elaborate series of games that have objectives that we are psychologically disinclined to accept. He believes that the only way to get past our continual "misrecognition" of what goes on around us is to review vast amounts of data derived from our experience and look for the explanatory patterns noted above. When I recently read about Mendel and his research, I was reminded of this statement by Bourdieu. It seems clear that Bourdieu is simply applying the same techniques that yielded such fine results to Mendel in an attempt to understand yet another aspect of life. Such is the nature and intent of science. The approach it teaches does not necessarily yield truth, particularly in the social sciences where cause and effect relationships are much more complex and hence hard to understand than they are in the "hard" sciences. But, science can still often help us to see more of the reality of what we do and why we do it than is ordinarily apparent from our limited vantage point buried deep in the forest with our noses pressed against the trees, as we tend to live our lives.

As noted above, I recognize that the scientific point of view is limited, and in particular that we should be careful of the dangers of becoming certain that we "know" the mostly unknowable. Most scientists are acutely aware of this limitation. Many non-scientists, however, who attempt to use science to support their positions respecting things like religion and social policy seem certain of the immutability of scientific "knowledge" on which their arguments rest. Many participants in arguments pro and con Mormonism's positive and harmful attributes and other religious issues suffer from this failing.

Despite its shortcomings, the scientific method has usually the best single tool we have when trying to understand our world and ourselves, or trying to improve the circumstances of our lives. It does this by helping us to select the most useful from among the available alternatives when deciding what to do or believe in a variety of circumstances. And my limited efforts so far to expand my perspective – to collect large amounts of data and look for explanatory patterns – have proven so helpful as I have

attempted to reconstruct my life's basic paradigms that I am committed to spending a significant chunk of time each week for the rest of my life to humbly continue doing just that.

During the last year, I have come to grips with how I could have lived my life to almost middle age (my kids would say well past it) while being completely deceived as to the nature of the most important influence over my behaviour – the Mormon Church. It now seems clear to me that my misrecognition was a simple and predictable function of a limited perspective caused by inadequate data, and that my predicament was engineered by the Mormon Church's leadership in order to keep me in a position where I would willingly continue to give massive amounts of time, energy and other resources to the Church. Those very leaders may be well intentioned and do many good things – and I am prepared to acknowledge that they are and do. But this aspect of their behaviour is not worthy of my respect and has resulted in my resignation of my membership in the LDS Church. I will not follow or trust people who have misled me in the purposeful and extensive way these people have.

As a result of my recent experience, I believe that the broader and more accurate our perspective on life, the more we understand ourselves and the world around us, and more satisfying life becomes. And I am not so arrogant as to believe that I now "understand" in some absolute sense. Understanding comes by increments, as many have noted, including one of the most flawed and human of all religious mystics, Joseph Smith who said that god's inspiration comes to us line upon line; precept upon precept; here a little and there a little.

Pattern Finding and "Feeling the Spirit"

Let's try the above data collecting and pattern-finding exercise out with respect to an issue of particular relevance to Mormons and other religiously oriented people - feeling "the Spirit". Again, I come back to the point that science should not be expected to identify "THE TRUTH". But, it is very helpful when trying to decide whether one theory or another makes the most sense. In the case of "the Spirit" within Mormonism, two of the many possible theories are as follows:

The first theory is that there is a real entity called the Holy Ghost that makes its presence felt to, and guides, baptized Mormons in a way that is unique to them. Other people (good living non-Mormons) have access to what might be called the Holy Ghost-lite. The Spirit does not reside "in unclean tabernacles", and hence one must be at least reasonably obedient to god's commandments in order to sense the Spirit's presence, be guided by it and emanate its influence to other people. People who are not living righteously are often deceived as whether the Spirit is present or not, which explains why sinful, unrighteous people reject or can't understand Mormonism. This theory does not explain why those with the Holy Ghost-lite do not immediately recognize the real deal when it is presented to them. This is one of the many mysteries that Mormons are encouraged not to think about.

The second theory is that most people of all cultures, and of both religious and irreligious orientation, are affected by powerful emotional experiences the nature of which is determined by a complex matrix of genetics, circumstance and personal belief. These experiences play an important role in forming relationships, romantic love, achievement of various types, creativity, etc. They have many, interrelated causes, but the nature of these differently caused experiences is often very similar.

Lets look at data gathered over a wide range of human experience, and a long period of time, and see which of these theories makes the most sense.

The neurological aspect of spiritual experience has been carefully studied from a scientific point of view (See Newberg et al, "Why God Won't Go Away" for example). So we have quite a bit of information about how many people from different religious traditions have experience that seems identical to neurologists. We understand that these experiences are powerful and relatively rare in life, and so should be expected to exert a significant influence over human behaviour. Spiritual experience, at its pinnacle, it is closely related from a neurological point of view to sexual climax, and hence is profoundly moving. We know that while the neurology of many spiritual experiences are similar, the symbology of the subjective experiences they create is drawn from the individual experiencer's culture, and hence differ radically. That is, Mormons relate this experience to Mormon symbols, such as Christ, the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith etc. Catholics have experiences related to the Virgin Mary, various Saints, Christ, etc. Hindus have it with members of their pantheon etc. In this, these experiences resemble near death experiences in which the neurology is similar, by the symbology is drawn from individual cultures. We also know that this experience occurs in non-religious settings as well, such as with respect to artistic performances, certain types of meditation, and even athletic events.

Then, we come to the fact that within religious communities it is well known and documented that insincere, dishonest, and even criminal people have gone for years in "sin" while persuading virtually all those around them that they had "the Spirit" and causing many who associated with them to think they felt its influence. Examples of this include the various high profile evangelists who have been proven to be involved in stealing from their congregants and involved in various types of sexual problems while on a daily basis moving people by "the Spirit", and legions of respected Catholic and other clergymen who have sexually abused children. Closer to home we have many Mormon leaders, such as a member of our former Stake Presidency, who have been convicted of pedophilia while again regularly moving those close to them by the Spirit. These cases, as was the one in Calgary, have been quietly dealt with so that the hue and cry to which the Catholics and other churches have been subject has not yet plagued Mormonism. My wife and I were interviewed for a combined total of four hours by the former member of our Stake Presidency in question just before our marriage, and felt spiritually moved by him. We later determined that at the same time he was abusing young boys – both members and non-members of the Church.

A missionary in my mission (Peru Lima South and Peru Arequipa – 1977 through 1979) was legendary for his ability to break the rules and baptize at the same time. He was one of the highest baptizing missionaries in our mission. Famously, he once committed a family to baptism and went on a date with a local girl during the same evening. He had a gift for causing the people with whom he dealt to feel emotion, and to connect with them in an apparently sincere fashion. I suggest that it was this gift, combined with his wonderful statistical production as a missionary, which kept him in the mission until the end of his two-year term. I would guess that he went on to a highly successful career in some form of sales after his mission.

And then we have Paul H. Dunn, one of my favourite General Authorities while I was growing up. I can remember the spine tingling spiritual experiences I had while reading his stories and listening to him speak at conference or on tapes. The stories that so enthralled me and filled me with the Spirit, both in their hearing and in my many repetitions of them to friends and particularly to investigators in the mission field, were eventually admitted to be false.

Phenomena such as those noted above have also been carefully studied. There are techniques that can be used to create an emotional response in those people subjected to them. The circumstances and genetic heritage of the responding people are part of the equation, and some human beings are much more capable than others of generating this kind of response. In Mormon culture, these people are often assumed to "have the Spirit", and frequently rise to leadership positions provided they exhibit the other behaviours required in that regard. Most are moral people. A few are like the Stake Presidency Counsellor described above. Their ability to project "the Spirit" has been proven to be misleading as to their reliability. Joseph Smith may be the paradigm example in this regard. He clearly had the ability to cause those near him to feel the Spirit. And his reliability was questionable at best.

So, when we analyze data of the type just described, a picture comes into focus of a humanity wide phenomenon that is labelled "the Spirit" in some cultures, and other things in others. Experiences that are functionally identical to what religious people in one culture call "the Spirit" are found within the same culture, but called something else. That is, a Mormon artist may have an experience while creating something that is very similar to that on which she bases her LDS testimony, or a Mormon scientist may experience the same thing during a moment of significant insight. As a result, they may thank god for the influence of his Spirit in their earthly work, while their atheist artistic or scientific neighbours could have the same experience, revel in it, and simply feel grateful that such experiences come along with the creative parts of life.

Perhaps most importantly, the data above provides clear evidence that what passes for "the Spirit" – an entity assumed to exist outside of us that somehow influences us – in many cases is located wholly within us. This is classic misrecognition in Bourdieu's sense of the term, and of such a type that it is later recognized, and then ignored or lamely explained in order to preserve the integrity of the culture.

For example, there is no other way to explain my differing reactions to Paul Dunn's stories except on the basis of a change in my internal psychological state. As long as I believed his stories to be true, I felt the Spirit when I heard them. As soon as I knew they were false, they no longer had this effect on me. It appears that no outside agency was acting on me either before I learned the truth about him, or after. My feelings were solely a product of my belief – something that happens inside my own head.

I suggest that the same thing would be true of many of the spiritual experiences referred to above. It is clear to me that my ability to feel the Spirit from the Stake Presidency member mentioned above would have been impaired had I known that earlier that day or later that week he had been or would be sexually abusing young boys. And I would not have accepted his advice, particularly that related to sexual matters. That portion of the interview was by far the longest. And, I might have been uncomfortable as my fiancé disappeared up the hall with him (his office was not available that day) in search of a vacant room, and while she stayed with him alone for the roughly two hours as he coached her respecting the sexual aspects of married life.

Does the data just summarized mean that the Holy Ghost does not exist? It does not mean that. Rather, it means that on the basis of the data I have collected, the second theory above is far most likely to be correct than the first. And if today I have to choose one of those theories to guide my action (which I do), I would be wise to choose the second. If someone would like to modify the theories, or collect more data, we could then reconsider the matter and decide what makes the most sense in light of that further analysis. Going through this process could cause me to change my mind. I must remain open to that.

On the basis of the foregoing, at this point and on the basis of the best analysis I can muster, it seems to me that the Mormon belief in the Spirit is a classic example of what Bourdieu would call "misrecognition". That belief is based on a narrow range of experience and data. When a broader data set is considered, it makes little sense in that light. But as was the case with those involved in the primitive gifting system Bourdieu studied, people who have lived their lives under the presumed influence of the Holy Ghost posited by Mormonism may have a hard time processing any information that will require them to reinterpret their experience in a way that would undermine part of their life's foundational paradigm. I am grateful that for whatever reason, I have been both willing and able to gather the information required to expand my perspective so that I no longer think it wise to use the Spirit as a basic part of my wisdom gathering, decision making process.

Conclusion

Socrates said: "The unexamined life is not worth living". I am not sure what he had in mind, but in light of what I have just noted this statement has taken on new meaning for me. Perhaps Socrates intended examination to continue toward understanding, which like absolute knowledge cannot be achieved. So perhaps a fully examined but misunderstood life is worth living, but as soon as we stop using all reasonably available

means to examine and hence improve our lives, they become not worth living because other, much better, modes of existence are available. His injunction, hence, is perhaps not the hard-edged, absolutist statement it is often made out to be. Perhaps he was simply counselling that it is foolish to live less well than we are able to live.

I am now sensitive to the many ways in which I may examine my life, and believe that all are misleading in whole or in part because they proceed from inadequate or false premises caused by faulty perspective. Some are much more misleading than others. And some are so misleading we should have nothing to do with them.

The best we can do is take in as many points of view as possible, and learn what we can from each while recognizing that we can never be sure that we have "got it". This means that it is unwise to refuse to use powerful, perspective enhancing, life-examining tools such as those offered by historical analysis, linguistics, genetics, psychology, sociology and other branches of science to understand our religious or spiritual experience and the nature of the various religious institutions and others who will ask for our trust and offer to guide us through life. To do so would be to ignore relevant, perspective expanding data that lies before us awaiting our use. This is the equivalent of trying to understand the universe without telescopes, or biology without microscopes. Anyone who encourages us to act in this manner is an unreliable guide. And it does not matter whether their bad advice is due to deceit or ignorance. In either case, they should be ignored and their influence avoided.

The most important question for me is how I can continue to improve my perspective, while using what I now have to live life as fully and joyfully as possible.