

A Taoist Reading of “A Proclamation to the World”



Prologue

The “Proclamation to the World” supports family life. It was issued by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1995, during the tenure of Gordon B. Hinkley as prophet. Using a Taoist-inspired hermeneutic (and not actually Taoism *per se*), I will try to use the principles of *ji* (極) and *wuji* (無極)—extreme and no-extreme—to analyze this document which has been inspiring to some and discouraging to others.

My purpose is not to refute the content of the “Proclamation.” My point is, rather, to better understand its message and to consider why it has become such a divisive force for those within our faith culture.

My method is to point out the tension between *ji* and *wuji* as it appears throughout the text. The presence of this tension (as shown below with a color coding of the “Proclamation”) raises the question of whether the back-and-forth between drawing distinctions (or *ji*), on the one hand, and blending or down playing them (or *wuji*), on the other, was intended as a rhetorical strategy or if it arose from the nature of the topics being addressed. The *ji/wuji* interaction that characterizes the language of “A Proclamation to the World” tells us a great deal about how we Latter-day Saints understand (or how we tell ourselves to understand) gender, sexuality, marriage, family life, and love.

Although many of my Latter-day Saints readers will be unfamiliar with Taoism, you should be well acquainted with the notion of “opposition in all things.” We are told in 2 Nephi 2:11 that without the push and pull between opposites nothing happens. Indeed, without opposites the very purpose of creation would remain unfulfilled.

Without getting into the many subtle complications of Taoism, which is not my purpose here, I would like to propose that the fundamental Taoist interaction between *yin* (dark, wet, female) and *yang* (bright, dry, male) is not unlike the dynamic of “opposition in all things.” What follows, then, is a comparison between Latter-day Saint and Taoist understandings of opposition and resolution.

As Latter-day Saints, we have been taught that while opposition is necessary, it is not ideal. In fact, the purpose of opposition is to do away with opposition. To put it succinctly, the purpose of life is to get beyond extreme differences in our progression toward what the “Proclamation” repeatedly calls an “eternal” state, or what is called in Taoist parlance “*wuji*,” literally, a state of “no extremes” where all things are present.

In the well-known *yin/yang* diagram that shows a light swirl interacting with a dark swirl, the non-polar state of *wuji* is located in the exact middle of the diagram (as shown below). When occupying this central place, a state of equilibrium or stillness is reached. We can think of *wuji* as a blending of extremes, then, such that even maleness and femaleness no longer exist as separate or antagonistic forces.

According to this model, progress occurs as move within this bi-polar field (and against the centrifugal forces that swirling generates) toward this center point of *wuji*. In essence, the vector of this journey is toward a minimally gendered state of equilibrium as achieved by way of clearly gendered interactions. In other words, if we are to get to this state of “no-man-and-no-woman,” we must do so as men and women interacting with other men and women.

How well this Taoist mechanism of *ji* and *wuji* fits Latter-day Saint culture is the question I pose to you today. I believe that, even if the fit is not perfect, this dialectic between opposites can help us address the ways in which our present views about gender, sexuality, and love have gotten out of kilter—that is, not in conformity with our actual values and beliefs. I would like to consider four such points.

1) One problem that this analysis highlights is the possibility that we, in our embrace of eternal progression, present to our young people a picture of marriage that is far too sanguine. “Happily ever after,” is a one-sided romantic distortion. After all, what is marriage between a man and a woman if not “opposition in all things,” the clearly gendered way that things get started? I certainly do not mean to paint a negative picture of marriage. Surely, it is wonderful blessing for those who learn how to live in the supportive environment of parents and children. But who can deny that getting hitched is “asking for trouble”?

A couple’s decision to open themselves up to many future difficulties is celebrated with parties in our culture. Guests are invited. Food is shared. The hopeful act is commemorated and shaped with covenants in chapels and temples. That said, it is my observation that none of the sealers in our celestial rooms are saying that married life is going to be a breeze. Could the potential for the “hard knocks” that

“opposition in all things” brings explain why romantic love, as portrayed in romantic comedies in America, is so sexually and happily charged?

2) A second point to consider is the goal of romanticized gender extremes. According to the *ji/wuji* model, gender differences “get the ball rolling,” as it were. But our engagement with these two clearly differentiated categories (which are slightly obscured in the Taoist model, with a little *yin* in *yang*, and a little *yang* in *yin*) is meant to be a way to move beyond rather than essentialize gender differences.

Rita Franklin might disagree, but we “natural men” and “natural women” are enemies to God. As such, we need the spiritual training that will make us “submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [us],” (Mosiah 3:19) which includes marriage and raising children. Family life affords this needed training better than any other social institution. In essence, this is the point that the “Proclamation” is making. It is how we get from *ji* to *wuji*.

For increasing numbers of people, the gender options put before us are unappealing. I do not have a social-scientific opinion about why this is so. But perhaps our present insecurities about gender identity follow from the ambivalence we feel about giving up our individuality in order to participate in heterosexual marriage. For some, the typical Latter-day saint lifestyle seems more like a disintegration than an integration of personhood.

I, for one, believe that such fear misperceives *wuji* and the goals of family life. Eternity is not a “no man’s land.” Rather, it is more like a Buddhist state of nothingness (*mu*). That is to say, it is more like a fullness than a lack. In Latter-day Saint terms, human perfection is a matter of finding and developing our deeper godly nature, which both integrates and disintegrates all those qualities that we typically assign to those male and female stereotypes that are supposed to help us get the ball rolling. In other words, the latter-day version of *wuji* is similarly a fulfillment of endless potential (which comes with kingdoms and principalities, no less) rather than a nihilistic loss of meaningful distinctions.

3) As reflected in our complicated feelings about homosexuality, we might be confused about what it means to have non-polarity as a goal for everyone, especially for those who see themselves as fully and safely heterosexual. What the dialectic of *ji* and *wuji* suggests is a hopeful picture. But it is *not* meant to make us increasingly masculine or feminine.

According to queer theory, “normality” must be questioned and placed within quotations. When we consider the implication of *ji/wuji*, or “opposition in all things” as understood as a process of eternal progression, we come to a rather surprising “unworldly” understanding of gender. Given our affirmation of the divinity inherent in all men and women, it seems that Latter-day saint views of homosexuality would have to be bit different from the “norm” since queerness is nothing less than an attractive and even recommended option for the “non-queer.” Not only this, being “gender fluid” is a prerequisite for those who wish to progress eternally.

To put it crudely, men becoming like women and women becoming like men signifies a progression that is initiated by “opposition in all things.” It is something routinely taught in priesthood and relief society meetings as ways to make family life more fulfilling. This is because the eternal progression that is represented by family life leads to a blending of masculinity and femininity that recognizes gender extremes as a necessary and “natural” *beginning* point rather than an end in itself. This is to say that clear distinctions between men and women are a necessary beginning point. They are something to progress beyond. Latter-day saint sexuality is not a denial of one or the other but, rather, an affirmation of both that leads to the fulfilling of mortality.

Surely, this tension between an *affirmation* of extremes, on the one hand, and a *negation* of extremes, on the other, might explain in part why the “Proclamation” is confusing as “a statement of love.” Its dialectical structure reminds us of “writing by committee” more than of God whispering words of wisdom from a burning bush, or Job’s thoughtful progression toward a deep love of God. In tone, as an assertive “last gasp of modern order,” it seems at times loud and even harsh. The “Proclamation,” as formulated by President Hinkley and “the brethren,” as first delivered in an address to to “the sisters,” was meant to be loving and encouraging even if it sounds patriarchal and in violation of the principles forceful.

This problem of tone is, for our church, a huge problem. Perhaps because of its proclamatory style, it is easy for us to see this document in a reactive way: as a praise of male and female difference that is a full-throated condemnation of queerness. But according to my Taoist-inspired reading of the text, if the “Proclamation” is a condemnation of anything, it is a critique of extreme masculinity and extreme femininity, of a warping of gender that ignores, denies, and abuses the blessings of intimacy that righteous, loving family life makes possible.

4) One last point. By way of the *ji/wuji* dialectic that propels our progress on the covenant path that leads to eternal happiness, we find a possible answer to a lingering conundrum of Latter-day culture regarding gender: the all-too-noticeable

absence of a Mother in Heaven even in a document that has as its topic the eternal family. We must wonder. If our Heavenly Mother does not get some stage time here, in this final word about family life, then where in the world could she possibly make a showing?

I would propose that she is, in fact, here, but in a way that you could only discern if you put on the pair of spiritual glasses that allow you to see the “she” in “he.” In an eternal state of *wuji*, where all things are present, extremes are left behind. The activities of procreation and nurturing lead us “on to eternal perfection,” to that eternal place where gender distinctions between fathers and mothers eventually come to have an “honorary” significance. In short, refined gender (as is it seems to be encouraged by our prophets) is not the same as natural gender. In fact, the tension and movement from one to the other seems to be the very point of the “Proclamation.”

Gender does not disappear in heavenly beings, not even in their perfection. But it probably becomes “eternalized.” To the extent that our Eternal Father and our Eternal Mother become nearly indistinguishable from one another in their glory, we would have to say that to know One is to know the Other. In much the same way that Jesus the Son, is indistinguishable from God the Father, so is Heavenly Father indistinguishable from Heavenly Mother.

The progression from extreme (gender) toward non-extreme (gender) suggests that life “in the name of” the Son is similar to life “in the name of the Father.” Just as we do not feel cheated when Jesus speaks as the Father, perhaps we should not feel so short changed when the Father speaks as our Mother (on those very rare occasions when he speaks at all). To know and hear and love the One is to know and hear and love the Other. Who could possibly doubt that God’s love is as feminine as it is masculine?

This does not make our Heavenly Parents “freaks.” But, logically and emotionally speaking, it does make them deeply, deeply queer. In this sense, they are not of the world, but of an eternal order that we come to understand “here a little, there a little.”

What the separation of gender makes possible is creation as a coming together. Logically and emotionally speaking, we cannot know our Heavenly Parents except as One, as refined in their status as eternal creators who are “sealed” to each other, so as to become inseparable and un-cleavable: man as man and woman and woman becoming man as woman, and woman as man. To essentialize gender differences in a

way that did not allow this *wuji*-sort of blending to occur would leave us in the lurk, in a Hollywood- and Disney-inspired “perpetual unhappy beginning” that would be the ground hog day that never moved on. It would leave to the “happily ever after” that is nothing but a delusion and the source of unless confusion, unhappiness, and lack of understanding.

Men who just don’t get women, and women who just don’t get men is Lucifer’s clever strategy for us. It is a horrifying denial of our eternal potential to learn what there is to learn about having a body.

To insist, as the secular modern world would have it, on an equal role for Heavenly Mother as a female version of a male priesthood holder would be to invite remaining forever in a state of opposing genders rather than moving ahead to the unity (and, yes, to a nothingness) that God’s love brings. Practically speaking, when we’re happiest, everyone is wearing pants, or no pants at all. The work that needs doing gets done, with everybody pitching in. In this state of happy oneness, we can, and should, see our Heavenly Mother in everything that our Heavenly Father is. I really don’t think *they* would mind, do you?

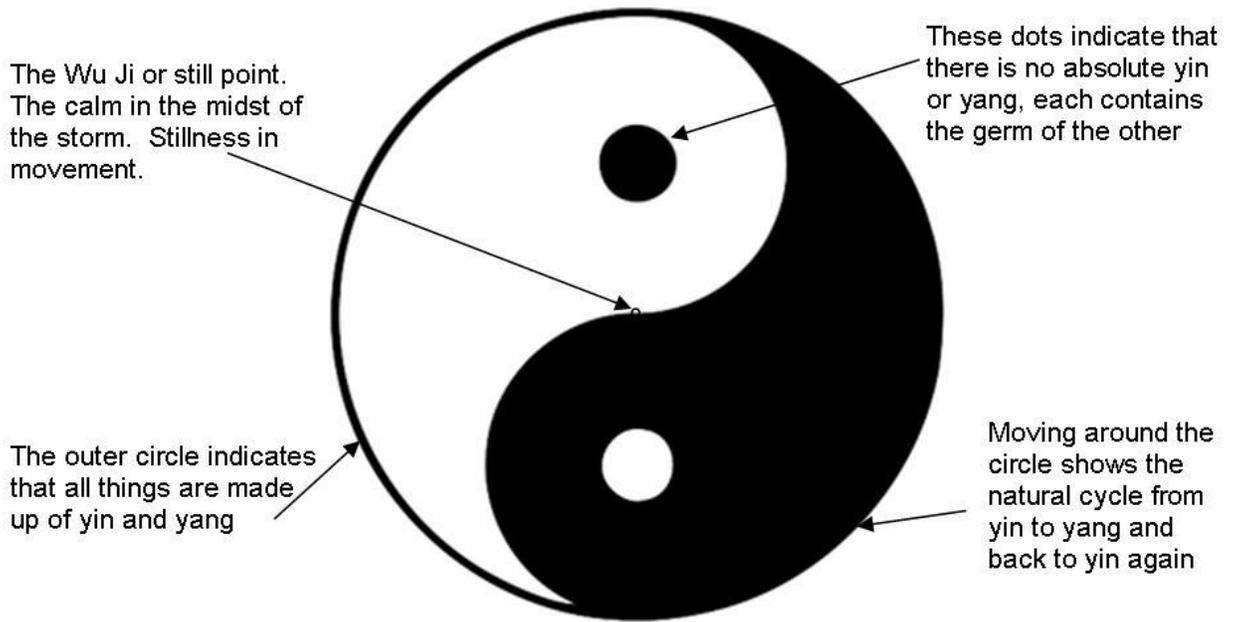
Here at last, we come to a reading of the postmodern plural yet singular “they” that finally makes sense. Not surprisingly, this new use of the pronoun comes to us by way of the piercing insight that only queerness affords. When speaking of eternity, anything less than “they” makes reason stare.

We journey on the path from *ji* to *wuji*. Our Heavenly Father is a man. They love us. Our Heavenly Mother is a woman. They love us. Together as eternal partners, they love us.

What the “Proclamation” teaches us is that queerness might be truer to the tone of tried-and-true Latter-day saint progression than what usually passes for “normal” sexuality, which in its worldliness too often manifests themselves as an arrested and wanton rebellion against God’s purposes. Who can blame our children for rejecting the stereotypes (and the counter-stereotypes) that they grow up seeing? What we have to do a better teaching is that those modern stereotypes are not ours! The point of young men and young women is to learn how to visualize the eternal that lies beyond “natural gender.” Without this new accounting of the differences, our young people will remain vulnerable to the hesitance and liminality that prevents them from moving on to *wuji*.

This is why young adult sexuality has to be motivated by faith. It is on the so-called “covenant path” that lust plays out “within the bounds that the Lord has set.” If postmodern theories of sexuality teach us anything, it is that in lust come the first intimations of godly love, driving us foolishly and recklessly toward a life of involvements and commitments that we might otherwise reject. As an opening move, lust is something to work with rather than against. It denotes an “opposition in all things” that makes the eternal happen.

Finally, allow me to say that as a sinful and repentant twice-married man there is a lot of love and understanding to be gained in men learning from women and women learning from men. President Hinckley, who was a man with a warm smile and a genuine openness, would have expressed his thoughts more lyrically perhaps—as a poem or a hymn rather than as a proclamation—had the modern-postmodern transition not fallen down on him like a collapsed house. Perhaps soon, before our latter days are over, some future prophet, some gay happily married saint, will speak joyfully of the glory, and all flesh will see it together.



Reading the Proclamation

To make it easier for you to notice the *ji/wuji* give-and-take tension as it appears in the Proclamation, I have coded it as follows.

Yellow words and passages are *wuji*-supporting.

無極 wuji, without extreme, non-polar, unifying

Marriage, parenthood, creation

Family, children

Shared divine nature, Godlike, eternal

The blue words and passages are *ji*-supporting.

極 extreme, polar, separating

Men vs. women (gender)

Proclaiming vs. persuading

Sacred vs. worldly

The green words and passages express goals or the purposes of God's plan for us.

Purpose

Creation

Family life, eternal unity

Divine destiny

Purple areas mark ambiguous words and passages, where the tension of *wuji* and *ji* raises important questions.

Ambiguous areas

Are love and care enthralling or heavy?

Are the bonds of matrimony empowering or enslaving?

Is the individual who is born of family life integrated or disintegrated?



The Family--A Proclamation to the World

The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

We, the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, solemnly proclaim that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children.

All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. 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. The divine plan of happiness enables family relationships to be perpetuated beyond the grave. Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for individuals to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally.

The first commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve pertained to their potential for parenthood as husband and wife. We declare that God's commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force. We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.

We declare the means by which mortal life is created to be divinely appointed. We affirm the sanctity of life and of its importance in God's eternal plan.

Husband and wife have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children. "Children are an heritage of the Lord" (Psalm 127:3). Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, and to teach them to love and serve one another, observe the commandments of God, and be law-abiding citizens wherever they live. Husbands and wives—mothers and fathers—will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations.

The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity. Happiness in family life is

most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities. By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners. Disability, death, or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation. Extended families should lend support when needed.

We warn that individuals who violate covenants of chastity, who abuse spouse or offspring, or who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God. Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.

We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.

This proclamation was read by President Gordon B. Hinckley as part of his message at the General Relief Society Meeting held September 23, 1995, in Salt Lake City, Utah.



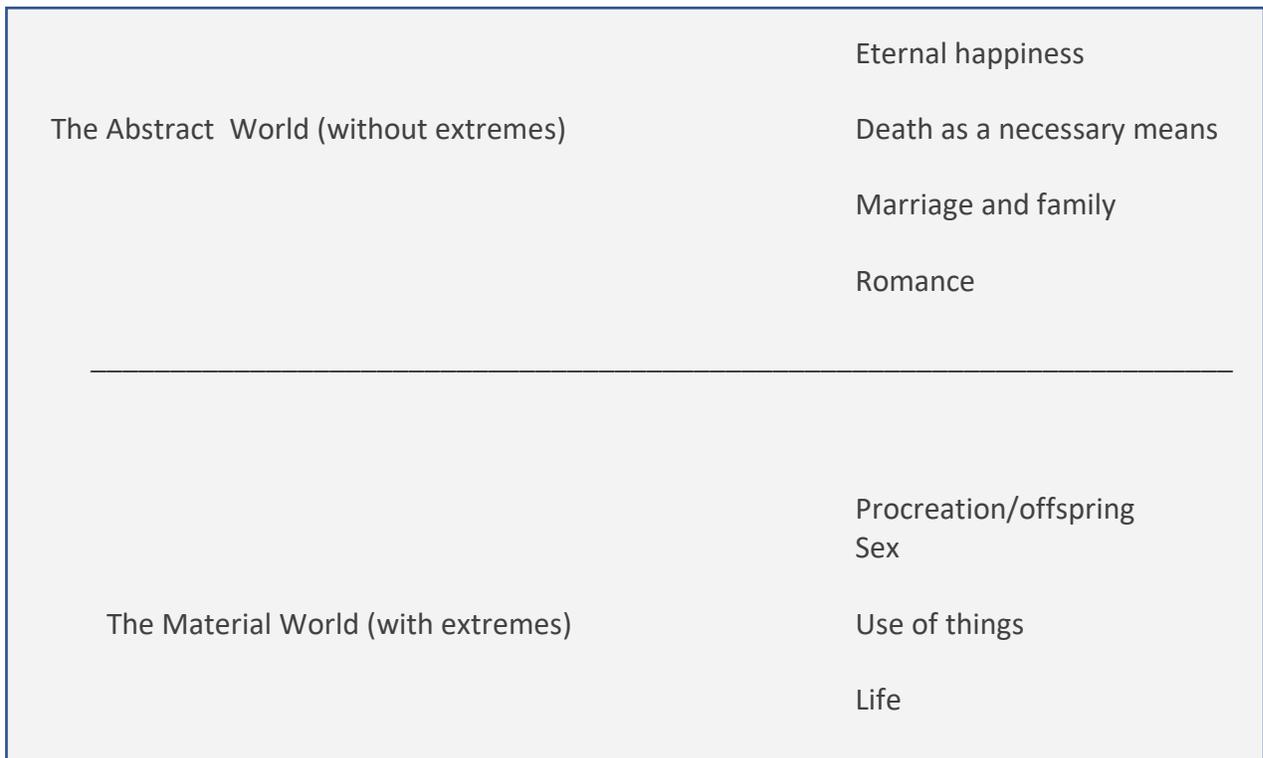
Questions

1. Are God's eternal purposes served well by *proclamations* to the world?
2. What is the heart-felt substance of this document?
3. Is gender a necessary "opposition in all things"? In other words, how do *yin* and *yang* encourage the dynamic interaction that gets women and men to "dance" with each other?

4. Let's accept that "opposition in all things" is, in fact, needed to get the ball rolling. To where, then, does the ball roll, to what does "the dance" lead? (The Taoist model suggests that the goal of life is to end up at the point of *wuji*, a non-extreme equilibrium.)
5. Is it true that "opposites attract?" Or do we have to be compelled by proclamations such as this to get us to love members of the opposite sex? Does this movement come naturally or by commandment and covenant?
6. If the road to perfect love begins in gender opposition, are we portraying love facilely when we call it "happily ever after"? In what sense is marriage between a man and woman "asking for trouble"?
7. Let's think about this state of non-distinction (*wuji*) as the goal of God's eternal plan. Does this melding of gender roles mean that queerness is a laudable precociousness? Or is it, rather, an unproductive shortcut or a kind of "cheating"? In what ways do the lessons that lead to happy marriage (think of guys who cook and women who take out the garbage), encourage queer behavior?
8. Are "male femininity" and "female masculinity" desirable? Does our Father in Heaven have feminine characteristics? If yes, what are they? In what sense is Heavenly Father also our Heavenly Mother?
9. Does one have to be "fully male" or "fully female" to be able to learn from the Other? Or do modern attempts to create clearly defined gender types (in sharp opposition to the other) produce unattractive and even toxic stereotypes? The macho man, femme fatale, and so on.
10. Have we (and our children) been raised to be "real" or "godly" men *or* women? Are we attracted to the images of maleness and femaleness that we encounter in the world? Does

our attachment to a clear sexual identify, “who we are,” get in the way of our love identity, “who we are not but aspire to be?”

11. Does the full range of *yin-yang* “gender oppositions,”—at play in romance, marriage, and procreation—help us come to understand things that “staying in my lane,” would not allow?
12. Is love (as a state of non-polar *wuji*) a state of nothingness? Is our approach toward eternal life an “above-the-line” yearning for “beyond death.”



13. Would a glorious “*wuji* heaven,” a state of “all things present,” include plants, pets, and places? In other words, how much is *wuji* immortality like our present mortality? How similar is life now to after death?

14. Is sexual desire a yearning for “a-thing-that-is-no-thing”? Or is the attractiveness of a realm above-the-line irrelevant to the “opposition in all things” that compels men and women to embrace each other sexually? In other words, how much is “love” driven by physical animality versus metaphysical yearning? (Or maybe you’re like me and think that animality *is* divine since all things are spiritual to God.)

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May 4, 2020