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Michael Walbridge

## An Interview with Dr. Edwin E. Gantt

Dr. Edwin E. Gantt, a BYU Associate Professor of Psychology, is one of the student body's favorite members of the BYU Department of Psychology. He was awarded the Teacher of Honor Award by the Brigham Young University Student Honor Association in 2002. His unique perspective has influenced numerous students to consider psychology from alternative points of view and from within the context of revealed latter-day truths. Dr. Gantt is particularly interested in examining the various (and often problematic) ways in which empathy, altruism and religion have been conceptualized and explained in many of the major schools of contemporary psychology and psychotherapy. Some of his works include "Empathy. Encyclopedia of Human Development" and "Hedonism, suffering, and redemption: The challenge of a Christian

### **How did you decide to pursue psychology?**

I always wanted to teach. I'd enjoyed it for a very long time, and still do. I knew I wanted to teach particularly after having served a mission. I originally wanted to be a history teacher, but after taking a couple of psychology classes I decided to explore that subject more. I don't know that there was an exact moment, but it became increasingly clear that I wanted to teach at the collegiate level. I mean, I'd always loved teaching, and I'd always loved doing lots of reading, and I tolerate writing—it all began to fall into place. I had flirted with the idea of teaching high school or seminary, but opportunities and my inclinations pointed me to teaching at a university. I had good mentors and looked up to them, and I wanted to do the kinds of things they were doing.

### **You received your PhD from Duquesne University, a Catholic school in Pennsylvania. Tell me about that.**

While I was an undergrad, and while I was in the master's program at BYU, I worked with Dr. Richard Williams, who had helped me shape in my mind the aspects of psychology I was most interested, which are the historical and philosophical aspects. There are a limited number of places to pursue those areas, and especially regarding the questions I had concerning agency and human meaning's place in psychology. I ended up leaving BYU and transferring to Duquesne because of its unique philosophical perspective. I feel I did good work there, got good training in not just clinical psychology (which is what the program was), but in

contemporary phenomenological philosophy and natural science and human science approaches to psychology.

### **At the undergraduate level, you teach History of Psychology, Critical Issues in Psychology, LDS Perspectives and Psychology, and Psychology of Religion.**

I also have taught the introductory course since coming to BYU, and Personality and Social Psychology at Duquesne. I even teach the occasional Book of Mormon course here.

### **That's interesting—most professors teach two to five, but you teach seven. Some have said your courses are very similar—particularly Critical Issues and LDS Perspectives. I was in the latter course once and in it you said yourself that some faculty questioned the need for it. How would you respond to the accusation that your classes are highly similar?**

Oh, I wouldn't view it as an accusation. For me, critical issues in psychology, such as its status as a science, its commitment to reductionism and determinism, and its conception of – or even neglect of -- agency, morality and God, are critical issues everywhere. They aren't just for a critical issues class—they are critical to every part of the discipline, especially regarding psychology from an LDS perspective. If students are going to be educated, have an informed imagination and the ability to tackle various dilemmas and debates in our discipline, they need to be aware of these issues—I'd especially hope they would have a sound grasp of

the issues after graduating coming from this university. The core concerns in all of my classes are the same. The context, process or avenue for approaching these issues and concerns may be different, but they're still relevant in all the areas I teach. I bring these issues up in my introductory course, not just a psychology of religion course.

**Which one of all these is your favorite to teach?**

I remember someone asking Dr. Bruce Brown why he introduced each of his children as his "favorite" and his response was "because they all are." I'd have to say that all of my classes are my favorites. So, it's all of them. I have said to a 353 class that they are my favorite class, and then said the same thing to my 311 class the same week. I don't think I could teach if I weren't passionate about the subject matter and about the students.

**From your perspective, how have the LDS Church and the field of psychology cooperated and how have they clashed?**

I think the church and psychology share similar sentiments. I think most psychologists are decent, caring people who want to help reduce suffering. I think the church is deeply committed to people as well. They both are interested in relieving the suffering of those who suffer from, for example, domestic violence or addiction. They've been able to work together in accomplishing these goals. On the other hand, whether intended by any individual psychologists or not, the discipline in many of its theories and practices is hostile to religion in general, and the LDS church in particular. It is reflective of the conflict of secularism and naturalism against religion, a conflict that you see in other disciplines and fields as well.

I think psychology has been instrumental in propagating a worldview in which the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is irrelevant—one that is corrosive to faith. It's been a principle purveyor of a worldview that is egoistic and self-oriented, rather than theistic and other-oriented.

**A change of subject—what is your history with hockey and how exactly did you get involved with the Ice-Cats?**

I think my involvement with hockey seems a little bit of a mystery sometimes to my students and my colleagues. I didn't grow up with it, actually. A friend in graduate school in Pittsburgh introduced it to me and I was immediately hooked. I was impressed with the speed and skill involved. So, I started skating and playing. I got my kids involved. It has become a whole family thing. I got to BYU and there was a student on the team in one of my classes. He saw me wearing a hockey tie, which isn't exactly a common item on this campus, and he asked me if I liked hockey. "Yes. I love it," I said. "Would you like to be the faculty advisor for our team?" he asked. I asked what it entailed. It was simple and mainly had to do with making sure their grades were up. I immediately said that I'd do it. A month later, the head coach was gone, the assistant coach was made head coach, and they needed another coach to help out as an assistant. It was a very steep learning curve. I've now been head coach of the IceCats for two years. I recently had my 150th overall career win as a coach, including all levels of youth hockey, high school, and college. I am also nearing my 300th game.

I think the main reason I like coaching and playing is because it's tremendously relaxing. Even though it can be stressful, it's very different from what I'm usually doing—what I do as a coach tends to have more immediate effects, as opposed to teaching students or writing papers, where the effects of the work I do there in my field and job may not be apparent for weeks, months, or years.

**Or decades, perhaps?**

Yeah, even decades. Having a paper that I have slaved over and think well of get published, connecting with my students and having a class go really well, or just beating Utah State again . . . It all brings joy.

**Sounds like it. In state rivalries are always fierce, especially in Utah.**

Yes, they are. Hey, we can keep talking about hockey if you want.

**Well, I'll guarantee I'll mention you beating Utah State.**

Okay, good.

**What advice would you give to undergraduates majoring in psychology?**

I gave a talk at a Psi Chi dinner about six years ago, and the advice I gave there remains the same. Take advantage of the opportunity you have before you to study widely and broadly. Major in psychology if it's your passion, but make sure to study outside of it, too. If you do, I promise you it will come to bear fruit.

I asked how many students at that dinner were double-majoring. None of them were. I asked how many minors there were. A few hands showed. I asked how many were minoring in something outside of the social sciences. Only two hands were left. People should study psychology in as broad a way as possible.

**By “broad way”, do you mean “psychology and the way it interacts with other disciplines, other parts of life”?**

Yes. Study the way it mixes. And study literature, study art, philosophy, business, whatever else you like and find interesting, but make sure you study something else, too. An Engineer once came to me and said “Well, I was an engineering major but I like psychology now, so I gave it up.” I told him, “Don't simply give it up! You like it, right?” He said he did, and asked why he shouldn't give it up. I told him, “Because if you become a psychologist, one day you'll have a depressed engineer walk into your office.” Of course, I'm not talking about just engineers. I'm talking about other parts of life.

Psychologists with more imaginative, informed, and varied backgrounds are better psychologists. I take a cue from William James. He was a physician and philosopher, not just a psychologist. Freud and Jung had other interests and professional training, too. The best psychologists always have.

*\* editor's note: The Ice Cats officially became a part of the BYU sports family in the 2007-2008 school year. Consequently, Dr. Gantt is now the coach of the BYU Cougar Hockey Team.*