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# Gospel Law and Natural Law: Practicing Psychotherapy in a Spiritual Context

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*Gospel  
Law  
and  
Natural  
Law*

PRACTICING PSYCHOTHERAPY  
IN A SPIRITUAL CONTEXT

*Wherefore, verily I say unto you that 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 chil-  
dren of men; neither Adam, your father, whom I created.*

— *D&C 29:34*

For persons embarking on any rational, scholarly, or scientific endeavor, the presupposition of lawful orderliness seems inescapable. With this presupposition in place, we are afforded the metaphysical backdrop against which a coherent and systematic account of the physical universe may be formulated. Without the presupposition of orderliness, no successful endeavor toward systematic and coherent knowledge would seem likely or even worth pursuit in the first place, since the universe would be characterized by only randomness and capriciousness. The presupposition of orderliness, in short, enables the generation of orderly knowledge.

Moreover, *prima facie* evidence gives us no reason to doubt the remarkable orderliness of the world, delicately formed with lawful regularity, harmonious ecological systems, and multiple levels of organization. From our everyday experience, we possess a knowledge of the predictable manner in which objects and entities tend to move and operate. From physics' laws of motion, we can accurately predict the movement of an object, given a knowledge of its initial conditions (e.g., location and velocity); from chemistry we can confidently predict the outcome of chemical combinations such as nitroglycerin and kieselguhr (dynamite); from biology and medicine we have dependable knowledge of how anatomical structures and systems such as the human circulatory system routinely operate and, under certain circumstances, fail to operate. Finally, and more broadly, we see how (according to some construals) physics, chemistry, biology, and "special" sciences, such as economics, psychology, and sociology (among others; see Fodor, 1981) fit into a monolithic, though tidy and well-organized, hierarchy of sciences, often with one providing the ontological foundation for the next (e.g., the theorizing of August Comte, 1988).

Because the world appears to be so orderly and because the assumption of lawfulness is taken so seriously in the physical sciences, it is not surprising that the social and behavioral sciences have come to view their subject—the human being—as a mere natural object that operates in accordance with this same lawful necessity. Perhaps Voltaire, the well-known French philosopher, best captured this idea when he remarked:

It would be very singular that all nature, all the planets, should obey eternal laws, and that there should be a little animal, five feet

high, who, in contempt of these laws, could act as he pleased, solely according to his caprice. (As quoted in Robinson, 1986, p. 298)

Turning  
Freud  
Upside  
Down

Should we flatly and uncritically presuppose that human beings, as one more bit of ontological baggage in a lawful, orderly universe, operate in necessarily lawful, orderly, and utterly predictable ways? And if human beings are subject to natural laws in much the same way as any other natural object in the universe, how do we, as Latter-day Saint scientists and practitioners, reconcile important gospel principles, such as moral agency and divine intervention, with a deterministic scientific framework? Should such a reconciliation be performed?

In what follows, we will address these concerns by clarifying the meaning of human action and the practice of psychotherapy, first, under the concept of natural or scientific law (terms that we will equate for the moment), and second, under what we refer to as gospel law. We will make several key distinctions between these two broad conceptions of law and outline the implications that each conception holds for the idea of human existence, as well as for the idea of a professional, therapeutic relationship. In so doing, we will make a case for one possible reconciliation of gospel law and orderliness that, we think, is consistent with Latter-day Saint doctrine and our overall thesis. Finally, we will discuss our reconciliation's implications for the practice of psychotherapy.

### **What Is a Law of Nature?**

The belief that the universe operates according to lawful regularities is widely acknowledged by scientists and lay persons alike. Although contemporary physics has long acknowledged quantum mechanics and relativity theory (e.g., Zukav, 1979), these developments may or may not have implications for psychological science; one prominent theoretical psychologist suggests that they may not (Robinson, 1984). Others have suggested that much of contemporary psychological science still operates under a Newtonian model where human action is thought to be fully determined by that subset of natural laws and forces pertaining to human beings (e.g., Slife, 1993).

Despite the ubiquity of the concept of natural law, the question of what precisely is meant by *law of nature* is difficult to answer. In

many cases, the term *law of nature* refers to a universal, scientific principle that governs or determines the whole of the physical world, a principle such as the “law” of gravity, Newton’s laws of motion, the laws of thermodynamics, and so on. There are more circumscribed scientific laws as well, such as Stevens’s power law (loudness grows in proportion to intensity raised to the power of 0.67) and the Bell-Magendie law (the separation of sensory and motor functions of the spinal cord).

Textbooks and trade books in the behavioral sciences vary in their definitions of the concept of scientific or natural law but commonly converge on one of two varieties: (a) laws are theories that have been so well supported that they are taken to be universally true (Bordens & Abbott, 1999, p. 465; Herzog, 1996, p. 11; Pelham, 1999, p. 29), and (b) laws are empirically observed regularities that, once quantified, require a theory to explain them (Bordens & Abbott, 1999, p. 465; McBurney, 1994, p. 36; Singleton, Straits, Straits, & McAllister, 1988, p. 23). Some have argued that laws are central to science because they describe (or perhaps explain) functional relationships between two or more genuine phenomena in such a way that we are afforded a clearer, often mathematical, understanding of them (e.g., Fechner’s law; see Robinson, 1995). Perhaps the most sophisticated rendering of this approach to scientific law comes from the work of Carl Hempel (1965), whose hypothetico-deductive explanatory model serves for many as the ultimate goal of science (Robinson, 1986). Opposite this approach to lawfulness are eliminative laws (i.e., nomological reductions; see Hyland, 1995; see also Churchland, 1986), which seek the reduction of our ontology (what we assume to have real existence) to one kind of fundamental substance—often physical matter—such that only one set of laws is needed, rather than possible multiple sets of laws that obtain at different levels of physical organization.

Clearly scientists and philosophers are not in complete agreement regarding the nature of a scientific or natural law per se. Bearing in mind the variety of ways with which scientists and philosophers are prone to use the concept of law in their work, we can nevertheless identify a common conceptual thread that runs through many definitions seen in the behavioral science literature, rendering them largely equivalent. The common thread to which

we refer is adequately described in Blackwell's entry on law of nature in *A Companion to Metaphysics* (Kim & Sosa, 1995):

Turning  
Freud  
Upside  
Down

It is widely held by both scientists and philosophers that our universe is governed by scientific laws and that it is one of the primary aims of science to discover these laws. . . . Lawful regularities are said to be in some sense necessary and capable of bestowing some kind of necessity on events which they subsume. The necessity is sufficient to support COUNTERFACTUALS. (p. 266)

This definition suggests at least four things about “natural lawfulness” as the concept is used in science: (a) The concept of natural law takes us to the realm of metaphysics, where we are confronted with the philosophical question What is the ultimate nature of reality? If the axiom expressed in Blackwell's definition is true, then nature consists, at least in part, of the existence of fundamental laws that govern the properties of objects and entities that said laws are thought to cover. Laws of nature are, in this sense, part and parcel of the organization and operation of the universe. (b) Laws of nature usher in a kind of necessity where physical events in the universe could not operate in any way other than that which is determined or described by a given law—there are no exceptions. (c) Laws of nature support counterfactual conditionals (i.e., contrary-to-fact conditionals, or *if-then* statements where the “if” portion of the premise is known to be false), which means that the laws should obtain universally, not just in cases where they have been historically corroborated (e.g., if the volume were decreased by .33 in a hypothetical cylinder [even though it was not], then its pressure would have exerted 44.1 pounds per square inch). (d) If natural laws do not themselves determine or govern the whole of physical reality, then they are at least factual descriptions of the orderly, predictable manner in which objects and entities do operate.

### **Human Beings under Natural Law**

It is the above characterization that we will henceforth refer to as natural law and that we will now address in light of its implications for ordinary human activity. Our principal question is as follows: Do natural laws, which are thought to determine the physical universe, determine human beings as well, thereby obviating the

theoretical possibility that humans may act by what are commonly taken to be their own agentic powers? Surely from the orthodox scientific perspective described above, we must answer this question in the affirmative, for as philosophical psychologists have observed, “The notion of ‘free will’ in a determined universe violates every canon of parsimony, scientific unity, objectivity, and positivism” (Robinson, 1986, p. 452). “Put bluntly, if the will is truly free, then there can be no lawlike generalizations about it to be had” (Green, 2000, p. 63). This notion of lawful necessity is clearly taken for granted in behavioral science research texts that posit a determined universe, including predictable and controlled human beings, as a central axiom of science.

So far, little of this discussion should be surprising to those who have been trained in science and who are well acquainted with its fundamental canons. The assumption of orderliness is taken to be a prime prerequisite in accruing knowledge, and science’s long pursuit of natural laws is a logical extension of this assumption. But it also behooves us, as Latter-day Saint scientists and practitioners, to consider the consequences of this canon so boldly stated yet so often uncritically accepted. Because others have already competently identified and explored the implications of an approach to behavioral science that assumes lawful necessity and the automaticity of human action, we will briefly review what are, for our purposes, the six most crucial implications.

The first implication of natural law as a foundational principle in behavioral science is the loss of personal responsibility (Rychlak, 1979; Slife & Williams, 1995). If human beings operate according to natural laws and thus possess no innate volitional ability, then (as the classic example goes) their activity is no more purposive than that of a rock rolling down a hill, which moves merely in accordance with the laws—motion, gravity, and so on—that are thought to govern the entire physical universe.

A second implication of natural law is the loss of meaning (Gantt & Reber, 1999; Slife & Williams, 1995, pp. 14–64; Slife & Gantt, 1999). If human beings operate according to natural laws and thus possess no innate volitional ability, then their activity is no more meaningful than that of the above-mentioned rock, which is not ordinarily thought to be operating in any meaningful way.

This is to suggest that the meaning of an act derives in large measure from the purpose or intention of the initiating agent.

A third implication of natural law is the loss of morality (Gantt & Reber, 1999; Williams & Gantt, 2002). In a universe with no intrinsic meaning and no human moral agents to consider consequences, to make informed choices between options, and to recognize (and perhaps correct) mistakes when committed, there can be nothing in the lives of human beings that reasonably resembles any action that could be considered “moral”; rather, all activity is in some sense neutral. It just is, like any other natural event—ultimately a mere instance or by-product of the universal law that necessitated it.

A fourth implication of natural law is pernicious pessimism (James, 1897/1956; 1907/1978). The loss of agency and its corollaries—loss of personal responsibility, meaning, and morality—brings with it the loss of hope, the onset of a destructive pessimism, and, indeed, the paradoxical situation where we find ourselves locked in a universe where we can be deeply regretful of an act yet unable to have acted otherwise in order to avoid the regretted act in the first place. Moreover, our lack of agency precludes the possibility of ameliorating our action in the future in any way, thus making future error unavoidable. This paradox was presented in William James’s famous dilemma of determinism (1897/1956), a dilemma which seemed so preposterous to James that he rejected the doctrine of determinism upon which it was based and affirmed unadulterated free will, a “melioristic” doctrine that allowed for the possibility of loose play in what appears to be a fixed and determined universe and for the possibility that human beings could be thus afforded the freedom required to improve the quality of their lives (James, 1897/1956; 1907/1978).

A fifth implication of natural law is that at least one part of Latter-day Saint doctrine is false. Prophets and, indeed, the body of scriptures accepted by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as inspired have adhered to the principle that human beings, as children of God, are given the gift of moral agency. This is not an obscure principle known only to a few General Authorities and scholars of ancient and modern scripture; it is a principle taught from baptism (or even before baptism). Of course, the concept of



agency may mean different things to different Church members, but there seems no reason to debate the many scriptures in which human agency is described as an essential part of the gospel, for example:

All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence. Behold, here is the agency of man, and here is the condemnation of man; because that which was from the beginning is plainly manifest unto them, and they receive not the light. (D&C 93:30–31)

A sixth and final implication of natural law is the loss of spirituality itself. Other commentators have shown that the assumptions of modernist science, including that of a closed universe controlled by natural law, are at odds with the notion of a spiritual universe (Slife, Hope, & Nebeker, 1999). To argue in favor of a closed universe governed exclusively by natural law is to argue against a world wherein the sacred, spiritual, and miraculous can exist. In a closed, naturalistic universe, there is no God to transcend what we take to be the ordinary workings of nature—that is, to create or set apart the sacred, to bring spirituality to our lives, to work miracles, and so forth. If we accept the concepts of naturalism and natural law as they are commonly understood in the behavioral science literature, nothing can transcend nature because nothing but impersonal nature exists, from the most overarching laws to the smallest particles of matter.

This brief sketch of the consequences of the concept of natural law is meant to suggest that Latter-day Saint scholars should be concerned with the philosophical question of human agency versus lawful necessity. It is our assessment that the general picture of human existence under a strict natural conception is one that brings with it the impossibility of a meaningful, moral, and spiritual life where we may, through our agency—in conjunction with the grace of Jesus Christ, whose atonement permits the possibility that we may be “ameliorated” and washed clean—strive toward a Christian ideal.

### **Psychotherapy’s Ambivalence and Natural Law**

If the aforementioned consequences of natural law hold for human beings in general, then what are the consequences for counseling and psychotherapy in a Latter-day Saint context? Ultimately,

we will show that these consequences—the loss of agency, personal responsibility, meaning, and morality—are borne out in the psychotherapeutic relationship as well. Because psychotherapy and counseling are driven by scientific findings that are undergirded by natural law, the implications of naturalism are inextricably tied, at least theoretically, to the practice of psychotherapy.

However, the idea of counseling and psychotherapy as practices devoid of agency, personal responsibility, and meaning may seem counterintuitive to practitioners, especially to Latter-day Saint practitioners. What sort of psychotherapist—LDS or otherwise—would deny the client’s freedom, autonomy, and personal meaning? That this question arises at all in the minds of practitioners demonstrates their commitment to specific assumptions about positive mental health and psychotherapy that are incompatible with the notion of natural lawfulness.

For instance, in a commonly cited survey of mental health practitioners—including clinical psychologists, marriage and family therapists, social workers, and psychiatrists—common psychotherapy values clustering around agency, freedom, and autonomy emerged. The survey reported specific psychotherapy values that practitioners considered important in the guidance and evaluation of psychotherapy with all or many clients (Jensen & Bergin, 1988). These values include “one’s sense of being a free agent; having a sense of identity and feelings of worth; being skilled in interpersonal communication, sensitivity and nurturance; being genuine and honest; having self-control and personal responsibility” (p. 295). Clearly, these commonly endorsed psychotherapy values include rather than exclude notions of agency, responsibility, and morality. Furthermore, the Jensen and Bergin (1988) survey findings are consistent with other assessments of practitioner values. In delineating what he considered “essential therapist values,” Hans Strupp (1980) included “the dual goal of personal freedom and human relatedness. With regard to the former, it extols individual autonomy, responsibility, fairness, decency, and honesty in interpersonal relations” (p. 399). Thus, many therapists assume that human beings are fundamentally moral agents, and they conduct their clinical work in a manner consistent with that assumption.

If therapists often practice in a manner that encourages client freedom, autonomy, and responsibility, then why perform a critical examination of scientific law and naturalism within counseling and psychotherapy? From our perspective, a critical examination of scientific law and naturalism is salient for two reasons.

First, the assumptions that inform the behavioral sciences in general, of which counseling and psychotherapy are a part, can influence us in ways that are not always explicit. Without careful analysis, it is easy to appeal to worldly ideas that lead us afield, even when we have the best of intentions. This is not necessarily to say that we should abandon the entirety of psychological, scientific, and scholarly knowledge and that we should never try to understand the natural and social worlds of which we are a part, but it is to say that the fundamental assumptions and theoretical starting points of our scholarly and practical projects, as well as our conclusions, should not flatly contradict principles, such as agency, that we know to be true.

Furthermore, even if practitioners do assume agency, morality, and related topics as guides to the therapeutic encounter, the research and theories that are expected to drive counseling and psychotherapy are informed by a science that rests on naturalistic assumptions. This situation, of course, is highly paradoxical and may be the crux of the infamous research-practice schism in the discipline. Ultimately, we are left with a situation in which many therapists base their practice on an assumption of agency in spite of their formal training and in spite of subscribing to naturalistic assumptions (Williams, 1998).

A second reason for critically examining natural law conceptions within psychotherapy is that concerned practitioners need to be conscious of the disparity—in all its manifestations—between a theistic and a naturalistic conception of science and psychotherapy. If the contemporary assumptions regarding human nature, psychotherapy, and science are inconsistent with the tenets of the restored gospel at the most fundamental level, then a theoretical foundation consistent with the restored gospel must be explicitly formulated. That is, we should not be content with merely ignoring our training and the disciplines of counseling and psychotherapy, but rather we should be actively striving toward an explicit, systematic,

and well-thought-out approach to counseling and psychotherapy that is consistent with our most fundamental beliefs.

For this reason, we present the implications and consequences for therapy that logically follow from the tenets of natural law. We do not assume that all therapists practice in the manner outlined here. Nevertheless, the therapeutic implications discussed are the inevitable outcome of psychotherapy under natural law, whether therapists practice according to these principles or not.

### **Psychotherapy under Natural Law**

From a naturalistic perspective, lawful necessity is presumed to cover both normal and abnormal behaviors. Regarding abnormal behaviors, the discipline has developed a scientific classification system that describes different categories of diagnoses that are based upon a disease model of mental illness. We are referring here to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*, authored by the American Psychiatric Association (1994).

The *DSM-IV* is premised upon natural law. If diagnosed, persons are presumed to manifest a disease process characterized by a specific and consistent symptom pattern. The diagnostic categories themselves are designed to be static and objective representations of an external reality—in this case, the “reality” of mental illness. Hence, the therapist can predict the course and outcome of the disease, because the client’s behavior is expected to conform to the predictable and stable pattern that characterizes the diagnosis. These diagnoses are then assumed to be universal and generalizable. Although exceptions to this universalism may be thought to occur in certain circumscribed cases (as in the case of culturally different clients), the diagnoses themselves are presumed to cut across contexts. In this way, the diagnostic system is a lawlike and universal system in the vein of naturalism.

If therapists utilize the *DSM-IV* as it is intended to be used (i.e., as a universal category system), clients can suffer detrimental effects. When therapists use the diagnostic system as a means of understanding the client, they are less likely to see client behaviors that contradict characteristic behaviors of the particular disorder. Indeed, therapists only “see” client behaviors that are consistent with the diagnostic description. Ultimately, such a universal

classificatory system sabotages client agency. If therapists categorize a client through diagnosis, the overarching, lawful reality of the diagnosis eclipses the client; the client is not perceived to be or act other than what the diagnosis indicates. In this case, the client can never exceed the boundaries of the diagnosis.

Some may argue that the use of the *DSM-IV* categories is descriptive, rather than explanatory as we suggest. However, given the axiomatic assumptions inherent in the diagnostic system, it is a quick and seductively easy step from viewing diagnoses as descriptive to viewing them as explanatory or real. Consider an example case, which is based on an actual client of the second author of this paper. The client, whom we will call Jack, is forced by the court to attend group psychotherapy because he committed various acts of domestic violence. Through therapeutic work and assessment with Jack, the group leaders converge upon a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder as the most accurate representation of Jack's pathology. He consistently manifests antisocial symptoms in his interactions with others. For instance, he may exploit and manipulate others for his own personal benefit without any semblance of remorse, and if other group members confront these behaviors, Jack vehemently denies their truth.

What if Jack briefly changes his seemingly characteristic pattern? Suppose Jack abruptly, yet genuinely, acknowledges his responsibility for hurting others but then returns to his characteristic pattern of denying responsibility. Will the group therapist recognize the change as a real change consciously initiated by Jack, or will she explain the change as merely a veiled aspect of his underlying and stable disorder? These questions hinge upon whether we view the diagnosis as a greater reality and truth than Jack himself. When clients are resistant to change, seemingly stuck in their old dysfunctional behavior patterns (as Jack is), it is particularly tempting to invoke the explanatory power of the *DSM* diagnoses.

When the diagnosis defines Jack, his possibilities for change are limited. In this case, therapists are at risk of becoming hopeless about Jack and his prognosis. This is indicative of the "pernicious pessimism" ushered in by natural law. The therapist cannot maintain an optimistic belief in the possibility for change because Jack's

behavior is already determined by the course of the pathology. We might wonder, Why attempt psychotherapy at all with such a client?

Some therapists may resist our characterization of the *DSM-IV* system and its potential effects. In practice, for instance, not all psychotherapists treat the *DSM-IV* categories as lawful descriptions of client behavior. Indeed, some therapists refuse to diagnose clients on the grounds that such categories label and ultimately limit clients. Others minimize the importance that diagnoses have for treatment. In the case of Jack, for example, some therapists might argue that it is crucial to maintain hopefulness for the possibility of Jack's changing. Indeed, part of the goal of psychotherapy is to facilitate the change process. While we are sympathetic to such an optimistic therapeutic position, the naturalistic assumptions that ground the *DSM-IV* make this optimism halfhearted at best. Indeed, preconceptions and categorizations may impact therapy processes in subtle ways that shape our perception of the client and his or her possibilities for change. It is well documented in the psychological literature, for instance, that people tend to be biased toward confirming rather than disconfirming hypotheses, and the manner in which diagnostic labeling can negatively influence therapy has also been discussed (e.g., Freeman & Dyer, 1993; Mills, 1989). Perhaps Nickerson (1998, p. 183) best summarized this concern when he stated:

Taxonomies that are invented as conceptual conveniences often come to be seen as representing the way the world is really structured. Given the existence of a taxonomy, no matter how arbitrary, there is a tendency to view the world in terms of the categories it provides.

Regardless of how we implement the *DSM-IV* in practical situations, our use of it does not alter the fundamentally deterministic and lawlike character of the theoretical system itself. In fact, if therapists were to minimize the lawfulness of the *DSM-IV* categories, then the system would lose its scientific thrust. In this case, psychotherapy would forfeit its claim to scientific accuracy.

Another implication of a commitment to naturalistic explanation affects the character of the psychotherapeutic relationship. From a naturalistic perspective, human beings are viewed as being

no different than other natural objects, all of which are presumed to be governed by the laws of science. Hence, human beings (and their pathologies) are objects worthy of scientific study. This is ultimately the justification for empirically validated treatments: practitioners ought to match certain disorders (natural phenomena) with certain treatments that have demonstrated predictable (i.e., lawful) scientific effectiveness. Just as in the physical sciences, where scientific achievement has resulted in technological advancements and mastery over nature, we in the behavioral sciences hope for the same achievements and technological advancements in the realm of human behavior (Slife & Williams, 1995). Psychotherapy becomes a means of helping the client achieve mastery over the self through the therapist's application of scientifically derived laws. From the perspective of naturalism, psychotherapy is not a relationship but an applied technology founded upon scientific advancement.

A technology-based psychotherapy, however, is not equipped to address questions of meaning and morality. Such moral questions are premised upon teleology and purpose—the assumption that there exists a higher aim or aspiration that one ought to strive for in life. A technological psychotherapy premised upon natural lawfulness cannot, by definition, recognize such purposeful intention (Guignon, 1992). A technological psychotherapy can only assist clients in achieving certain ends as long as those ends seem realistic and as long as they fall within the purview of scientific knowledge. From this perspective, psychotherapists cannot ask what constitutes the “better” or more “worthy” life; the therapist's only duty lies in applying the appropriate empirically validated treatments that facilitate specific mastery skills. Such a psychotherapy is ultimately amoral and remains indifferent to the ends in themselves (Guignon, 1992).

When moral considerations are removed from the reach of psychotherapy, spiritual considerations are excluded as well. In their scientific commitments, the behavioral sciences adopted an image of humanity defined by the lawfulness of nature. Within this naturalistic image, nothing of the sacred, religious, or spiritual can survive. Indeed, from this perspective, according to religious philosopher Mircea Eliade (1961), we live in a “desacralized cosmos,” a cosmos or world that rejects the significance of the sacred and denies its

manifestation. Consider the sacred phenomena of miracles, for example. Miracles have traditionally been defined as supernatural events or divine interventions that defy or radically alter the laws of nature. From the perspective of a naturalistic universe, such non-naturalistic explanations are viewed as primitive or unsophisticated explanations that were invoked before the true laws of nature were known. Hence, it follows that as we increase our “naturalistic” knowledge of the world, nonnaturalistic and miraculous explanations ought to become obsolete. From this view, miraculous explanations are ultimately errors or misinterpretations of phenomena that only the canons of science can accurately explain.

It follows, then, that a psychotherapist risks error in recognizing the miraculous or the sacred at work in the life of the client and in the course of therapy. For this reason, most therapists do not discuss miracles. Indeed, if therapists are committed to scientific and naturalistic explanation, miracles do not seem to emerge at all. Recognition of the miraculous requires recognition of the transcendence of the natural frame of things, and such transcendence is impossible from a naturalistic perspective. Ultimately, the sacred and miraculous cannot exist in the meaningless and causally determined spaces created by naturalism.

### **What Is Gospel Law?**

The above-described loss of agency, meaning, morality, spirituality, and, indeed, anything that could reasonably be considered part of human experience suggests to us not only that a natural law conception is burdensome and unprofitable from a therapeutic perspective but also that it is contradictory to the precepts of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. The picture of humanity that emerges from this naturalistic approach casts human beings as automatons that are no more involved in the working out of the substance of their own lives than would be any inanimate object utterly subject to the nontheistic laws of nature.

The restored gospel provides a different picture of humanity than this—one so vastly different that persons under the covenant of God who have “put off the world” are sometimes referred to as “peculiar” (McConkie, 1966, p. 565). Indeed, from a worldly perspective, Latter-day Saint doctrine is peculiar in that it ushers in a



concept of law that is in a sense incommensurable with the above-described conception of natural law—or stated differently, gospel law is of a different genre than the traditional scientific conception described above. Nonetheless, as we will now try to make clear, the conception of law that we see in the scriptures (though of a different genre than other conceptions of law) has profound implications for our understanding of human existence and the more narrow topics of counseling and psychotherapy—implications that stand in stark contrast to the determinism described earlier.

Perhaps the first and most obvious message one receives as she or he ponders the scriptures is that the concept of law is an integral part of the unmistakably righteous and divine plan of God. In *Mormon Doctrine* (1966, p. 433), Bruce R. McConkie stated:

Generally throughout the scriptures the term law has reference to the “law of the Lord.” (Ps. 1:1–2.) That is, it means the statutes, judgments, and principles of salvation revealed by the Lord from time to time. In ancient Israel, for instance, the law was the law of Moses—which was a preparatory gospel, a law of restrictions and ordinances. To us the law is the law of Christ—which is the fullness of the gospel or “the perfect law of liberty.” (Jas. 1:25.)

There are many such laws in the scriptures: the law of tithing, the law of chastity, the law of consecration, and so forth. These are the laws by which the children of God are blessed, guided, and judged; they are ultimately the means by which we come unto the Father and the Son.

Notice here that the idea of gospel law comes to us not as a set of naturalistic principles that determine the whole of the universe in the scientific manner described above—that is, in a strict way that precludes the possibility of human agents acting other than sinfully or virtuously (depending on the lawful regularities in place)—but rather as the decrees of the Lord that we may or may not choose to follow. This is to say, the Lord provides us the way unto him through his word and Spirit—through his mortal ministry, through ancient and modern prophets, through scripture, and so forth. Persons on earth may always choose to not follow the decrees of the Lord; they may choose to not follow the “strait and narrow path” (1 Ne. 8:20) to borrow a phrase from the prophet Lehi.

Indeed, it seems clear that the very idea of abiding or not abiding by a gospel law is predicated on the notion that the children of God are agents unto themselves—beings who may affirm a gospel law by obeying it or deny that law by disobeying it. The agency described here would seem to be the agency spoken of by the Lord in Doctrine and Covenants 101:78: “That every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, according to the moral agency which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment.” So it appears that the concept of gospel law actually demands moral agency.

### **Human Beings under Gospel Law**

But what of the nature of the physical universe itself? That is, irrespective of the sublime laws and covenants decreed by the Lord, what of our scientific intuition that we are situated in a universe determined by lawful necessity and uniform regularity? That is, what of the brute facts of gravity, electromagnetism, Newton’s laws of motion, the laws of thermodynamics, and so forth? These phenomena are, after all, crucial aspects of the Enlightenment-spawned universe that have suggested the veracity of the doctrine of determinism.

In response to this question, we first wish to stress that determinism per se is not an unequivocal fact of human existence; it is, rather, a philosophical proposition or predicating assumption that may be either accepted or rejected (James, 1897/1956, pp. 572–573; Robinson, 1986, p. 432; Yanchar & Hill, 2003). Whether this proposition is accepted or rejected, of course, will have profound consequences for the theories we develop and the therapeutic practices we employ, so it is crucial that practitioners and theorists consider this matter, and the matter of lawfulness in general, very carefully before advocating any particular position. In light of the fact that determinism is a philosophical position that may be either accepted or rejected, it seems easiest and most appropriate to refer to the scriptures (once more), which suggest two things: (a) the Lord has indeed granted us agency (as discussed above), and (b) the Lord is the decree-er of the putatively “natural” laws, as well as the other more commonly recognized gospel laws. Doctrine and Covenants 88:41–43 tells us:

He comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him, and all things are round about him; and he is above all things, and in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things; and all things are by him, and of him, even God, forever and ever. And again, verily I say unto you, he hath given a law unto all things, by which they move in their times and their seasons; [a]nd their courses are fixed, even the courses of the heavens and the earth, which comprehend the earth and all the planets.

*Gospel  
Law  
and  
Natural  
Law*

This passage suggests that there are no laws pertaining to the physical universe that are not established or decreed by God for his divine purposes.

The difference between an orderly, lawful universe with and without God, then, is that natural law without God operates by some kind of natural necessity where no exceptions are possible; for any anomalous phenomenon (including human behavior), there must exist some covering law, even if it has not yet been discovered. Even if we never discover a respectable law covering a given anomaly, the assumption is made that such a law is nonetheless operative. This assumption is taken as an “article of faith” of the traditional scientific philosophy that presupposes laws of nature.

An orderly universe with God, on the other hand, is a universe where God is the law as well as the exceptions to the law. Although God’s house is a “house of order,” it is up to his will whether or not gravity operates, even in particular situations or spatiotemporal regions (it may not, as in the case of Christ’s ascension or the parting of the Red Sea); whether or not the sick or afflicted can be miraculously healed (they may be, as in the case of priesthood blessings and Christ’s many miracles); and so on. Of course, this list gives only a small sample of “anomalies” in the scriptures that bear witness of the flexibility of what we call laws of nature. From this perspective, so-called laws seem to be as universal and immutable as God wants them to be—they are nothing more, nothing less. In this sense, the idea of natural law and gospel law might fit harmoniously if natural law is understood as God’s organization of, and operations in, the physical world that are subject to his will and that do not obviate human agency.

The scriptures are also clear that the gospel does not amount to some form of deism, where God merely sets the laws of the universe

in motion and then exits the scene, allowing nature to take its course without interaction or intervention. Rather, the scriptures suggest that an embodied, loving, and involved God participates with us as we conduct our lives here on earth. He is a god of miracles, a god who answers prayers through inspiration and through his servants, as we read in Psalm 50:15—“And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me”—and in 4 Nephi 1:5:

And there were great and marvelous works wrought by the disciples of Jesus, insomuch that they did heal the sick, and raise the dead, and cause the lame to walk, and the blind to receive their sight, and the deaf to hear; and all manner of miracles did they work among the children of men; and in nothing did they work miracles save it were in the name of Jesus.

From the perspective we are advocating, then, we need not think in terms of, nor feel beholden to, the traditional naturalistic concept of lawfulness; rather, we can recognize that this is God’s universe and that any manifest lawfulness is, in fact, God’s will.

Given our stance on lawfulness in the universe, we can make several inferences about the nature of human beings. First, as stated above, we have been given the gift of agency by our Father in Heaven and thus are responsible for our actions. With this gift of agency, any action will have been chosen from a larger (though limited) set of possibilities, and a sin need not have been committed. The existence of agency makes good on William James’s concern that human regret be viewed as the product of avoidable error, which, in turn, leads to the optimistic possibility that we may increasingly avoid sin and error in the future—that we may always ameliorate our conduct through repentance and by virtue of Christ’s atonement.

Second, human agency allows for the possibility of meaning and morality in our lives. Because we can freely and thoughtfully choose among the alternatives afforded by our immediate circumstances and the broader context of our lives, there is an intrinsic meaningfulness to our conduct. Our actions mean something because we intended certain things while ruling out other possibilities, hopefully of less worth or virtue. Moreover, acts can be judged

as moral or otherwise because we have the capacity to freely recognize vice and virtue and to act for the sake of one rather than the other. Understood this way, a moral act might be construed as one where the will (or explicit direction) of God is followed, although the possibility existed for it to not be followed.

### **Psychotherapy under Gospel Law**

If we accept the notion that human beings are the agentive children of a participating god who decrees the laws of the gospel, including those that appear to be natural laws, what then do we assume about the enterprise of counseling and psychotherapy? First, we assume that clients have agency. They have the capacity to generate meaning and to act for the sake of that meaning. Clients are never lawfully determined by their pathologies or past events or traumas. Certainly, these kinds of phenomena occur and contribute to human experience. However, these phenomena do not necessarily determine the lives of human beings. Rather, clients actively bestow meaning to such phenomena and, through their agency, establish for themselves the significance and impact of life events. Indeed, God's gift of agency allows for the generation of such meanings.

In this sense, agency allows for the "possibility of possibility"—the possibility of options and change (Slife, 1994). No matter how rigid and seemingly fixed a client's behaviors might be, the possibility of behaving otherwise always exists. Of course, this is not to say that such a rigid and fixed client would necessarily change. As therapists, we cannot force clients to change. Indeed, such change is ultimately in the hands of God and the client. However, under gospel law, clients always hold the possibility for change through Christ, and as therapists we should not abandon our hopefulness for such a possibility. Moreover, God may work among humans in other ways, such as by providing empathy, understanding, and insight or by softening hearts or by providing trials that ultimately refine character and strengthen faith.

Of course, as was discussed previously, many therapists already endorse agency as an indispensable feature of psychotherapy and the change process (Jensen & Bergin, 1988). However, the agency and the freedom to generate meanings and choices that many

therapists endorse may be of at least one of two kinds: human-centered agency or Christ-centered agency.

If people generate meanings and choices independently through their own originative sources of meaning and action, then agency is human-centered. Human-centered agency ultimately leads to a relativistic world comprised of a plurality of subjectively defined meanings, none of which can be viewed as “better” or “higher” than any others (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). In therapy, for instance, clients are often encouraged to create their own meanings and choices. However, when these meanings and choices are human-centered—when they emanate from the client’s own authentic and individual center—the therapist cannot challenge the client’s choice. From the standpoint of human-centered agency, all client choices are “good” choices as long as they are realistic and self-generated. In other words, the “best” choice for the client is one that is individually and independently conceived by the client. When all independent client choices are “good,” none can be better or worse. Ultimately, then, the potential virtue of such choices cannot be examined.

In contrast, Christ-centered agency through gospel law allows for an exploration of the moral dimension of choice. Hence, the second implication for therapy under gospel law is the inclusion of an unmistakably moral dimension to psychotherapy. Gospel law not only allows for agency but provides an orientation or grounding for how one ought to live. Gospel law establishes the boundaries of a “better” and “higher” existence as exemplified in the life of Christ. Therefore, Christ-centered values provide the standards and parameters of the good and worthy life. Psychotherapy under gospel law incorporates Christ-centered values as the foundation for psychotherapy. That is, Christ-centered values are the values of psychotherapy—the values that define therapists’ broader notions of psychological health. For instance, the divinely inspired words of the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians encourage us to act with charity, the pure love of Christ, in all aspects of our lives, as therapists or otherwise.

Under gospel law, our therapeutic work with clients is always and already informed by Christ-centered values like charity, hope, and love. Being “loving” in this manner emphasizes one’s obligations to

others before the self; facilitating client insight and behavior premised upon this Christ-centered value is viewed as the highest and most ethical behavior for clients (and therapists). Therefore, not only can clients (and therapists) choose to be loving, but they have a responsibility to do so, as indicated by gospel law and by virtue of their agency.

That psychotherapy is a value-laden enterprise is well documented in the academic literature (Bergin, 1980; Beutler & Bergan, 1991; London, 1986; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Tjelveit, 1999). Psychotherapy values are inescapable, and psychotherapists' values, whether held implicitly or explicitly, impact clients. So the issue is not whether a counselor endorses values; the issue is what kind of values a counselor endorses. From our perspective, the best psychotherapy values are Christ-centered values.

A third implication of gospel law for clinical practice is allowing for the emergence of the sacred and the miraculous. Recall from our previous discussion that miracles are traditionally defined as supernatural events that contradict the laws of nature. However, as the psychological historian Van den Berg (1961) argued, miracles are required to defy the laws of nature only when nature itself is described as lawfully and ontologically prior to religion. He suggested two things: (a) we can conceive of the naturalistic perspective as the interloper that has changed the way we look at God's creations, and (b) we cannot reasonably expect to see God if we assume a determined, mechanized, and mathematical nature that by definition omits the possibility of his presence.

The philosopher of religion Mircea Eliade (1961) described this determined and mechanized view of nature (i.e., natural law) as "profane space" (p. 22). Profane space, as contrasted with "sacred space," is devoid of miracles and is characterized as "homogeneous" and "neutral" (p. 22). That is, the profane space of natural law is neutral and meaningless. No space is qualitatively different or unique in comparison to any other space in nature. The possibility of such uniqueness or qualitative difference is characteristic only of sacred space. Eliade (1961) stated:

For religious man, space is not homogenous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others. "Draw not nigh hither," says the Lord to

Moses. "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." (p. 20; see also Ex. 3:5)

*Turning  
Freud  
Upside  
Down*

The space in which Moses stands is not neutral. Indeed, it is sacred space—space that is infused with meaning and purpose as defined by God.

By contrast, profane space cannot possess human meaningfulness, nor can it provide direction or orientation for its inhabitants, because it is neutral. This is to suggest that profane space—natural space—denies the presence of God. Indeed, God can be with us only when we allow his presence to unfold in us and when we allow ourselves to see God's presence in others. However, the idea of sacred space seems possible and important only from a nonnaturalistic perspective that grants the existence of the sacred.

Therapy under gospel law acknowledges the presence of the sacred from the outset. Clients are viewed, not as determined natural objects, but as spirit children of God who already reflect and glorify him. Clients' sacredness, as spirit children of God, extends beyond a diagnostic system that assumes behavior is determined by natural laws; clients, therefore, cannot be reduced to mere instances of diagnostic categories. From a gospel perspective, then, diagnostic categories, which are only our limited theoretical attempts to make clients' behavior comprehensible, should be held tentatively, not absolutely (Slife & Reber, 2001). The diagnostic categories never provide an exhaustive picture of clients, because clients—as spirit children of God with a divine potential—always have possibilities available to them that transcend the parameters of any particular category.

The sacred gifts of God, including the atonement of Jesus Christ, miracles, and moral agency, are what make therapeutic change possible. Such sacredness—Christ's work in us—allows clients to overcome psychological traumas, heal wounds, and implement life changes that would be considered unlikely or impossible from a naturalistic view. The therapeutic cases that particularly embody this sacredness and possibility for change are cases wherein the client exceeds the therapist's expectations. These are the therapy cases that surprise practitioners. Perhaps the client experiences profound insights that radically alter perceptions of reality, resulting in changes that no one in the life of the client (therapist included) had



imagined possible. Haven't we all experienced such cases? From the vantage point of gospel law, these are the cases in which miracles—manifestations of the sacred—occur.

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Gospel  
Law  
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