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### Agency: Philosophical and Spiritual Foundations for Applied Psychology

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RICHARD  
WILLIAMS

# Agency

PHILOSOPHICAL  
AND SPIRITUAL  
FOUNDATIONS FOR  
APPLIED  
PSYCHOLOGY

*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall  
make you free.*

—John 8:32

Perhaps no question regarding our fundamental human nature is more important than the question of agency. No issue takes us closer to the center of our being. Agency is a genuine watershed issue because the position we take on the issue of whether we are moral agents determines to a great extent the positions we must take on most other questions of psychological and therapeutic relevance. I think it not an overstatement to say that, in the social sciences, it will be very difficult to get other questions right unless and until we get the question of agency right. Agency is the hinge on which our understanding of all other psychological phenomena turns. At the same time, no concept in the contemporary social sciences has shown itself to be more resistant to clarity, closure, or even consensus than has the concept of human agency.

This essay will present, albeit in an abbreviated form, justification for these claims and for why we should care about the issue of agency in the social sciences. I will also argue that psychology and indeed much of our intellectual tradition has gone wrong in its attempts to understand agency, and I will illustrate how it has done so. Finally, I will suggest five necessary, though perhaps not sufficient, prerequisite conditions for the existence of human agency that must be incorporated into any adequate social scientific theory of agentive action. An understanding of agency grounded in these necessary assumptions—if it is reflective of the light and truth of revelation residing in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ—will empower us to do something of genuine importance in our therapeutic work, in the intellectual world, and in the broader culture, whose self-understanding is influenced profoundly and yet rather unreflectively by contemporary intellectual currents, including those popular in the contemporary social sciences.

In his book *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, Elder LeGrand Richards gave an account of Apostle Orson F. Whitney's conversation with a Catholic cleric whose assessment of Mormonism and its adherents was this: "You Mormons are all ignoramuses. You don't even know the strength of your own position" (Richards, 1976, p. 3). I think this observation is true from a theological perspective, although in ways perhaps unanticipated by the cleric who made it, and too often unappreciated by Church members. I also believe it is equally true from an intellectual or academic perspective.

The core idea of my work on agency (e.g., Williams, 1992, 1994, in press) came to me when I was a young Aaronic Priesthood holder in a rather small ward in a small town in rural Utah. In the course of his lesson one Sunday, one of my advisors, not an academic but a believing man, said something very much like this: “Free agency is not doing what you want to do; it’s doing what you should do.” For some reason that statement settled into my soul and felt true. It is the only thing I can ever recall telling my parents that I had learned at church. And it never left me. If I were to attempt to put into a single sentence the essence of the position on human agency presented in this essay it would be simply this: Agency does not consist chiefly in doing or being able to do what we want; rather, it consists in doing or being able to do what we should—in living truthfully.

In addition to making a conceptual analysis in support of this thesis, I hope to show that human agency is an essential and ineluctable facet of our ontological reality. I also hope that throughout the analysis it is clear that the concept of agency has far-reaching religious, theoretical, practical, and therapeutic implications.

### **The Inevitable Effect Our Understanding of Human Agency Will Have on the Course and Results of Psychotherapy**

The fundamental importance of agency for psychotherapy lies in the fact that the understanding of human agency that a therapist brings to therapy reflects the deepest and most profound ontological commitments and thus profoundly influences such things as diagnosis, etiology, choice of therapeutic treatments, and prognosis.<sup>1</sup> It will also inevitably influence a client’s own sense of self-efficacy and responsibility for his or her own behavior as well as the course and ultimate success of treatment.

Simply put, the question of agency is the question of what we fundamentally *are*. What sort of beings we are must surely determine in some strong sense what it means to become “pathological.”

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1. Obviously, the view of human agency that clients bring to therapy is also important, but this is not the subject of the present paper. Furthermore, given the position of relative status and the aura of authority enjoyed by the therapist, not to mention the fact that clients generally come to therapy seeking self-understanding from their therapists, clients’ understandings of their own agency are relatively vulnerable to influence from their therapists.

The understanding of our fundamental nature will give substance to our understanding of what it means to be “dysfunctional” and, probably most importantly, to our understanding of the nature of the “good and flourishing life” (Robinson, 1997, 1999).

If we do not know with confidence what we are, what we are capable of, and what the foundations and dimensions of a good life are, then all therapeutic endeavor is, in essence, a shot in the dark. Therapeutic outcomes judged to be positive may accrue, but we cannot escape the suspicion that such may be merely manifestations of a type of self-fulfilling prophecy involving shallow understandings of health and sickness, fairly emaciated expectations of the “good life,” and interventions designed to realize just those expectations.<sup>2</sup>

It is extraordinary but accurate that within psychology we have achieved neither unity nor even consensus regarding what sort of beings we human beings are at our foundation. The social sciences are characterized by substantial divergence of opinion and doctrine regarding just what it means to be a human being. The intellectual cleavages are often deep. They are important and deeply meaningful.

2. Some might argue that we do not need to have a final understanding of our being in order to achieve good therapeutic results, that other sciences cannot claim to have such understanding of their subject matter either, as evidenced in the field of quantum physics, or that such a final understanding of our nature is either in principle or in practice impossible, at least in this life. Such arguments have much in common with some lines of postmodern analysis in psychology (e.g., Gergen, 1991) and betray something of the unsettled character of contemporary psychology.

Others would argue simultaneously that psychology should accept only hard scientific truth and that ultimate truth is impossible. This spirit of intellectual agnosticism has substantive consequences for psychology and for the practice of psychotherapy, but they are beyond the scope of this essay.

A minimal response to the issue, particularly in this LDS publication venue, is that no small part of the power of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the latter days is the restoration of the possibility of real knowledge of a type that surpasses other knowledge available to the world in scope and surety. It includes knowledge of the plan and purpose of life, the history and potential of the human soul, and the perfectibility of human persons. Without this type and quality of knowledge, the Restoration hardly has any impact in psychology and psychotherapy, and the LDS psychologist hardly has any advantage over a psychologist whose roots and allegiances are both grounded firmly in the doctrines of men and the understanding of the secular world. We should confidently aspire to more than this.

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of this unsettled state of affairs is that it has arisen in a discipline which, since its inception, has attempted to define and establish itself *as a science*. In contrast, every established science seems to be settled regarding the fundamental ontology of its subject matter. Indeed, such a settled state—even if somewhat temporary—is one of the most important features that characterize a science as science. Thomas Kuhn (1970), for example, suggested that just such a consensus on the nature of the subject matter of a science is an essential part of what is required for the conducting of what he refers to as “normal science.” Kuhn’s work further suggests that ontology is one of the issues with sufficient import to bring about a revolution in science. Indeed when disagreements regarding the fundamental structure or nature of their subject matter have arisen in the established sciences, these disagreements have often precipitated substantial paradigm shifts, if not genuine “revolutions.” However, the important point for the present discussion is that these other sciences have settled the matter of the ontology of their subject matter—consistently, even if only temporarily.

It might be argued that it is the immaturity of the social sciences that has prevented their resolving the ontological question in regard to human nature. But this defense is wearing thin in view of the fact that there are currently sciences substantially younger than the social sciences which do not have the same problems. Rather, I am persuaded that the lack of a human ontology in psychology is attributable to a rather cavalier attitude toward the project. Many within the social sciences contend, without supporting evidence, that the question of ontology does not matter, thus taking refuge in a naive pragmatism that assumes one can do good without an adequate conception of just what, for human beings, might constitute the good.

Others in the discipline have argued that the question of ontology is best left to philosophy while we concentrate on our practical and empirical projects. It should be sufficient to note in response that no other science has left its most important questions to another discipline—not even to philosophy. Scientific psychologists continue to have serious debates about the nature of what it is they are studying. No other scientific field has such debates very long,

and when one does have them, it has them in earnest, pushing forward to a resolution of the debate. Furthermore, debates are most often precipitated by persuasive data from seemingly crucial experiments. The social sciences have failed to take their disagreements so seriously, and they have certainly not produced persuasive data. No technology has resulted from unsettled ontology. In psychology we have not achieved a settled state. We do not know, or at the very least, we are not confident of what our subject matter is. This unsettled state gives rise to some very severe problems, not the least of which is the rise of eclecticism, of a type not found in other sciences. The problems resulting from the lack of a settled ontology arise in two ways.

First, whatever else we may do in therapy in relation to the presenting symptoms or problems people bring to therapy, we will also inevitably give people a sense, at least a tacit understanding, of what they *are*—what kind of beings they are and thus what they are capable of. This, I believe, is an inevitable by-product of any therapeutic encounter. It is also a by-product, if not a direct outcome, of studying psychology in the classroom. Second, because an understanding of what we are underlies every understanding of what we can do, our clients, and others exposed to psychology, will also leave therapy, or the classroom, with an understanding of what they can do, of what is possible.

In my judgment, the best metaphor for therapeutic change and for teaching is conversion. A telling characterization of psychoanalysis, here paraphrased from Sigmund Freud, suggests the goal of psychotherapy is to raise people from abject misery to ordinary unhappiness. For a Latter-day Saint therapist, or any Christian therapist, this is simply not good enough. The restored gospel of Jesus Christ opens for us a vision of what we fundamentally *are* and of what we can become. It also offers the promise of confirmation of this vision and, through the tutelage of the Spirit, practice in achieving it in part in mortal life. Indeed, it can be argued that this practice of living our greater vision is one of the great mortal purposes of our lives. Because human agency is at the core of this vision, an understanding of human agency is, or ought to be, at the core of all psychological theories and practices.

## Human Agency as a Watershed Issue

Turning  
Freud  
Upside  
Down

Human agency is a genuine watershed issue for psychology and for a culture. It is not an issue to which one can be partly committed. Intellectual integrity, which honors rational consistency along with the nature of agency itself, requires that we fall on one side of the issue or the other. We either are or are not moral agents. The reason human agency is so crucial to our self-understanding and our achieving our purposes is that agency is the core of all that is most human about us. It defines our eternal character. There are a number of issues in psychology which, although important, do not go to the heart of our humanity. On these there can be disagreement with few grave consequences for individuals or for cultures. However, because agency defines human *being*, there can be no compromise. We must either believe in the reality of human agency, seek to understand that it is and what it is or give ourselves over to an entirely different understanding of ourselves and the meaning and purpose of life itself.

Unless we are human agents such that we have a genuine capacity for self-direction, which thus gives rise to genuine possibilities, and unless our pasts and our futures are in some fundamental sense open-ended and not merely given, it is impossible to attribute real meaning to our actions or maintain a sense of meaning in our lives and relationships. Without genuine possibility in life, all acts are simply necessitated and, without the possibility of being otherwise, are without meaning (Williams, 1987).

By the same token, if we are not human agents, since we simply *are* what we must *be*, we simply *do* what we must *do*. And since necessitated acts are neither good nor bad, we cannot behave morally or immorally. We can reach no judgments about morality except those we are predetermined to reach. It would be peculiar to refer to such judgments as morality. Furthermore, the imposition of any system of morality becomes tyranny because the determined preferences of one group must be imposed upon the natural propensities of others. In addition, if we are not moral agents, genuine intimacy is not possible. Beings who are less than agents are not capable of voluntary associations nor of purposively directing the path of their relationships. Necessitated relationships, because they lack intentionality and meaning, offer only a facade of objectively defined intimacy.



Finally, and this is relevant to all religious people and of particular importance to Latter-day Saints because we are a covenant-making people, only a moral agent can make a covenant. A covenant is, in its essence, a purposeful, free will act, undertaken for the purpose of accomplishing something nobler and larger than ourselves. Determined natural organisms, by definition, do not have purposes beyond and larger than themselves. They cannot do things of their own free will and choice. We cannot make covenants unless we are moral agents.

For the foregoing reasons and others, I am convinced that if we are to have a coherent and useful understanding of our own agency, we must take a philosophical hard-line position on the issue. This means that human agency is really an either-or issue. Because the existence and nature of our moral agency is an ontological issue, we cannot, as many try to do, take an eclectic position on the issue. Because, as an ontological issue, human agency is the starting point of our analyses and understandings of ourselves, it is not possible to be “partial agents”—we cannot be agents and not agents at the same time. Those who try to take such eclectic positions can do so only because they view agency as a derivative phenomenon arising from something more ontologically fundamental in our nature. It is, however, a logical inconsistency to hold that agency can arise from nonagency. It partakes of the same logical problem as attempting to get “something” from “nothing,” or “ought” from “is.” Such views of agency fail to take agency seriously, oversimplify the issue, and fail as psychologies capable of expressing our most human qualities and our eternal natures.

Although in one sense agency has proven to be an extremely complex issue, in another sense I believe it to be among the “plain and precious” truths of our humanity. My testimony is that the essence of the issue is not so complex that it cannot be simply grasped, as all principles of the gospel can be simply grasped. In order to illustrate this, I will discuss the importance of human agency in terms of its alternatives. That is, in trying to understand human agency, it is helpful to ask, What are the alternative understandings of ourselves that we are left with if we reject the notion of the fundamental reality of agency? The alternatives will be explored in terms of ontology and in terms of the conceptual issues that attend agency.

## If We Are Not Moral Agents, What Are We?

*Turning  
Freud  
Upside  
Down*

On the ontological level, the answer to the question, “If we are not moral agents, what are we?” is that we are moral agents or we are natural organisms. To say that we are natural organisms is to say that we are beings indistinguishable in our essence from the kinds of beings we encounter in the natural world. The actions of natural organisms are completely explained by the natural laws and principles that underlie them. Even as moral agents, we might expect that many natural laws and principles may describe the actions and processes of our bodies, and we must take account of these processes as we act in the world. However, to say that we are moral agents is also to say that in our actions that both arise from and reveal that which is most fundamentally human about us, we are not products of natural laws or principles nor are we controlled by them. A fairly radical naturalism is the alternative to an agentic understanding of human action.

Naturalism pervades both the academy and our culture. It may be the most obvious and insidious contemporary threat to our agency and to our proper understanding of ourselves. While, I will argue later, some sort of determinism is necessary for the existence of agency, the species of determinism offered to us in the theories and models of psychology, profoundly influenced by naturalism, are fundamentally incompatible with agency. We cannot embrace both reductive, biological naturalism and human agency.

Also entailed in the question “Agency or what?” is a difficult conceptual issue relating to how we might know or understand agency. We must inquire whether agency can be rendered intelligible and rationally consistent. This is an important issue because if agency cannot be rendered intelligible and cogent it will be difficult to accept and incorporate it into pedagogy and practice.

In most discussions of the issue, it is common to suggest that the alternative to agency is determinism. This analysis is, however, misleading because it is oversimplified and incomplete. The issue of agency is most often set up as if there were a conceptual dimension anchored on one end by determinism and on the other by freedom, or agency. This framing of the problem is unfortunate and comes from not being sophisticated and careful enough in our approach to

the issue. This, in turn, too often comes from not being serious in our analysis of the issue. The problem with this analysis is that there is a parallel dimension, most often tacitly assumed but not examined, that runs between determinism on the one end and indeterminism on the other. Since both conceptual dimensions are anchored on one end by determinism, it is common to conflate freedom and indeterminism since they both find themselves in opposition to determinism. This has imposed a great burden on those who advocate an agentic approach. Those who wish to defend agency in human action must also defend the proposition that human actions are indeterminate. This is too great a burden, and nearly all proagency arguments collapse under the weight of it. However, rather than abandoning human agency, the proper response is to examine the nature of determinism and indeterminism more carefully.

### **Determinism, Indeterminism, and Human Agency**

It is too often the case that arguments about determinism and freedom leave the concept of determinism itself unexamined, assuming it to be unambiguous. They rely on a general premise that determinism requires that all events have causes, most often taking natural causes to be the paradigm case. A finer-grained analysis will show that causality itself does not obviate agency. Some types of causes make agency impossible, but others do not. The analysis of determinism required to show this is also an analysis of indeterminism. What emerges from the analysis is that determinism is not inimical to agency. Rather, agency requires some form of determinism.<sup>3</sup>

Determinism is an attractive explanatory strategy in the social sciences because it appears to be a necessary assumption underlying any genuine science of behavior. However, this does not mean that only one particular understanding of determinism must hold if psychology is to be able to provide an understanding of human behavior that has the level of certainty attributable to science. I will

3. I am by no means the first to make this argument. Strands of the argument run all the way back to Aristotle. An early contemporary formulation of the argument can be found in Foot (1957).

suggest here what may be called a minimalist definition of determinism—one that if accepted will provide all that psychology needs of determinism in its quest for rigorous understanding and predictability but one that makes few metaphysical assumptions and which does not commit itself to a mechanistic ontology that destroys the possibility of agency. Under this definition, determinism is the proposition that all events (and other things, including human actions) have meaningful antecedents, absent which the events (or things) would not occur or would not be what they are.

Given this definition of determinism, indeterminism, in contrast, is the proposition that events (and other things, including human actions) have no meaningful antecedents. If human actions have no meaningful antecedents, they must arise from nowhere and for no particular reason. They just happen. Under indeterminism, all events are essentially random—not connected to other events in any meaningful way. When agency is conflated with indeterminism in human events, agency cannot be anything other than randomness or a capacity for complete caprice in our actions.

Two problems immediately assail any attempt to defend or explain agency as indeterminism. First, it is patently obvious that human events are not random but are meaningfully connected. It seems to violate our very nature as well as our experience to suggest that we behave without reason or rationale. It defies common sense to suggest that this happens on a large scale. Indeterminism in human events is decidedly refuted by experience. Second, agency as indeterminism provides for no more meaning in human actions than does determinism. There is no meaning in random, unconnected events. Determinism is important in our understanding of human behavior precisely because it preserves agency and morality. Agency as mere indeterminism cannot accomplish this. Thus, any adequate understanding of agency must eschew indeterminism and begin with the thesis that there is determinism in human events. The real question is what kind of determinism can preserve the possibility of a genuine agency that can, in turn, preserve meaning and morality in our lives.

Returning to our minimalist definition of agency, we can see that all that is required for determinism is that there be a strong link between events and their antecedents. We must next inquire after

the nature of this link. If there are strong links between behaviors and their antecedents that do not destroy agency but are still strong enough that without the antecedents the events would not occur (or be as they are), then we can preserve a meaningful agency and determinism at the same time. Mechanical and biological links are clearly destructive of agency, as are stimulus-response links governed by environmental forces requiring no active participation by an agentic person. It is obvious that neither nature nor nurture as classically conceived in psychology—the hallmarks of social scientific explanation—can explain events without destroying agency. Yet, even if nature and nurture fail to preserve agency, it does not follow that all meaningful links between antecedents and events destroy agency.

We can find an example of such links in the strong relation that exists between the plot of a novel and any of a number of subplots. Without the plot, certainly any subplot would not be at all, or, at least, it would not be what it is. However, there is never just one subplot that can possibly arise from any particular plot. Once a subplot arises, it can be rewritten, abandoned, or woven back into the plot at any one of a number of points in the plot. This example conforms to the requirements of determinism, yet it preserves possibility and the agency of the author. There are undoubtedly other ways of thinking about the relationship between events and antecedents that preserve both determinism and agency, but this example should suffice.

The astute critic of an agentic position will no doubt argue that this example of a novel is unfair because it assumes that the author of the novel already has agency or there would not be the flexibility in the relationship between plots and subplots he or she might create. But this is precisely the point. In the present essay, we can leave aside the question of whether similar agency-preserving relationships exist between the antecedents and events of the natural world, though I very strongly believe that they do.<sup>4</sup> What is

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4. The interested reader is referred to the work of the late physicist, David Bohm (1957, 1980).

most important has been established: in the world of human affairs, deterministic relations between human acts and their antecedents which do not obviate human agency are possible.

The critic's objection illustrates another point crucial to the present analysis: human agency cannot arise from nonagentic substances, structures, or processes. It must be an ontological *a priori* in human existence, or it cannot exist at all. It must be the starting point of our understanding of ourselves. Latter-day Saints, by virtue of restored knowledge, are in a uniquely strong position to defend this proposition. In summary then, agency is not the opposite of determinism. Agency is enfolded into the deterministic, and therefore meaningful, contextual and worthwhile universe in the orderly actions of morally agentic eternal intelligence.

### Human Agency and Free Choice

There is one other problematic aspect of the common understanding of human agency that deserves our attention. Nearly all analyses of agency in philosophy and psychology define it in terms of freedom of choice—the freedom to choose what we will or will not do.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most controversial part of the present analysis is the contention that there really is no such thing as a genuinely free choice. I will show that this state of affairs does not compromise our agency. It simply requires us to understand agency differently.

The argument proceeds in the following manner. It is inherent in the concept of choice that there be *grounds* for the choice. This is to say that choices must be made for reasons, and the reasons are formulated so as to take account of prevailing and possible conditions, motivations, life projects, contingencies, and principles, among other things. If there are no grounds or reasons for a choice, it is not genuinely a choice but merely a random action, unconnected to other

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5. Note that even if we cannot actually physically do what we “will” to do, the freedom of the will, the freedom to choose can still be intact and uncompromised. It is the freedom of the will, rather than the freedom to carry out an act, that is of real concern to any analysis of human agency (Thorp, 1980). However, the distinction blurs when one considers acts of will to behave as having essentially the same character as any and all other acts.

actions or conditions. As we have seen, this state of affairs reflects indeterminism. The grounds for our choice include such things as our experiences, our desires, our values, our cultures, our languages, our assessment of our capabilities, and our moral commitments.

At the same time, however, precisely to the extent that any of these things—the grounds or context of our actions—become really influential, they constrain our choices and compel us to act in one way instead of another. To the extent that our grounds for action become important and compelling, our choices are no longer *free* choices. Thus, we have a genuine dilemma. If we have no grounds as the foundation of our choices, making some choices more right or appropriate than others, then our actions have no rationale and thus no meaning. Our actions can be free of all constraint but not meaningful, and thus we have no agency worth having. On the other hand, if our actions do reflect the constraints of reason and the deploying of rationality in the assessment of the grounds for our action and the quality and purpose of our choices, then our choices are really not free but grow out of the grounds themselves.<sup>6</sup>

*Agency*

From my study of the problem, I conclude this is a genuine dilemma. It requires us either to abandon the thesis that we are human agents or to rethink our commitment to free choice as the defining essence of agency. I strongly recommend the latter course. This dilemma also points up another difficulty traditionally faced by psychologists who wish to defend agency. They generally end up defending mere freedom of choice, and then the analysis runs aground somewhere between the Scylla of rationality and the Charybdis of freedom.<sup>7</sup>

Attempts to resolve this dilemma I have outlined and to preserve free choice as the essence of human agency often take one (or

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6. Charles Taylor (1985) referred to this process as the making of “strong evaluations” and argued persuasively that this uniquely human capacity is a necessary constituent of our freedom if our freedom is to be judged worth having.

7. This predicament is reflected most clearly in the “radical choice” approaches to human freedom found in much of the existential literature. See, for example, the account of freedom given by Sartre (1956) and Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) trenchant critique.

more) of three forms. The first attempts to resolve the dilemma by granting that our choices are strongly determined by our grounds (reasons, values, etc.) but free choice is preserved in that we are free to choose those determining grounds. This analysis fails, however, when we simply inquire after the grounds on which we might choose our grounds. The problem of choosing the grounds for our choices of courses of action is analytically identical to the problem of choosing our courses of action in the first place. The same dilemma reemerges, and our understanding of agency ends in an infinite regress. I believe we can have a fuller and more helpful understanding of our moral agency than this—that we do not have to settle for the mysticism of infinite regress.

The second attempt to resolve the dilemma is to claim that while the grounds and reasons for our choices may influence us and our choices, they do not determine us or them. This analysis rests entirely in the distinction between influence on one hand and determinism on the other. When we search for the fundamental principle wherewith we can distinguish determinism from mere influence, we are drawn to the principle of agency itself. That is, something will be determining in our lives if we are not agents, but if we are agents, it will merely influence us. Thus, we distinguish between influence and determinism by invoking the concept of agency, and then defend our definition of agency based on the distinction between determinism and influence. This is, of course, a clear example of begging the question. The analysis is entirely circular. Again, I hope that we do not need to resort to such a question-begging analysis to defend a principle as profound and powerful as our agency.

The third attempt to resolve the dilemma within the constraints of a definition of agency as choice invokes a homunculus—a choosing agency within the larger agent person. The argument suggests that while a particular person may be constrained by grounds in making choices to the extent that the choices are not really free, some part of the person—an inner self, a central processor, or even a “soul”—is able to enter into the choosing process free from the constraints acting upon the person and make a free choice. This line of thinking encounters problems from two directions. First, when



we inquire about the grounds upon which this inner “chooser” makes its choices, we see that we end up in the same infinite regress entailed in the argument that we can choose our grounds. Second, if we define agency as the choices made by an entity unconstrained by our own personal and intimate concerns, constraints, and contexts, we wonder about the value of such agency. We would hope, as moral agents, that our choices should first be made by ourselves as whole persons and secondly that they should reflect our own moral commitments within our moral situation. The human and moral value of an agency divorced from that is questionable.

Based on the arguments outlined here, I have become convinced that our agency does not consist essentially in our potential for radically free action. We really would not value such actions because they would not make contact with any moral context or with any meaningful projects of our lives. Thus I am convinced we need to think about agency in different terms.

### **Freedom as Living Truthfully**

There are ways of understanding agency and freedom that do not fall prey to the conceptual problems we have just discussed. I present one such way as an example (see Williams, 1992). Suppose that I were to present you (the reader) with a very difficult mental puzzle, so difficult to solve that you could not do it on your own. I might allow you to freely generate and freely choose as many possible solutions to the puzzle as you possibly could, but because the puzzle is so difficult and is completely outside your realm and range of experience, you could not generate nor choose a real solution to the puzzle. I might provide you with a thousand alternative solutions from which you could freely choose, none of which would solve the puzzle. In spite of unrestrained freedom of choice, you would not be free to solve the puzzle.

When we inquire as to what is needed in order to be free to solve the puzzle, the answer seems to be that one would need the *truth of the matter* of the puzzle. Lacking the truth of the puzzle—what it is, how it works, and what it means—one would not be free to solve it. Thus it is possible to define agency, not foremost in terms of choosing, but in terms of having the truth or *living truthfully*. It is

truth that makes us free (John 8:32). In what senses does truth make us free? If we live truthfully, in accordance with and animated by truth, we are free from falsity. We are free from the effects and consequences of imagined constraints, blind alleys, and insubstantial apparitions with which a false world assails us. We are not trapped in a world that does not exist, trying to make sense of it or trying to achieve something that cannot be achieved in the false world in which we are stuck. We are free from insisting and maintaining in the face of contradictory evidence that the world and other people are as we take them to be (cf. Warner, 1987, 1997). Perhaps this sense of freedom is part of what was intended in Alma's explanation to Corianton that "wickedness never was happiness" (Alma 41:10). In the false world we construct from the raw materials of wickedness, we can never solve the puzzle of happiness, and thus we are not free to do so.

In a larger sense, truth gives us freedom from sin, self-deception, and falsity—from all of those construals of the world that hold us captive and prevent us from being who we, from a more truthful perspective, really are and what we, from an eternal perspective, might become. Lacking truth, we are prevented from tapping into that within us which inclines toward perfection and beckons us to be like our Father is. Understanding the nature of God, understanding the truth about ourselves and what it means to be the kinds of beings we are, knowing in our hearts the truth of the atoning grace of Jesus Christ, and realizing the reality of our moral purpose on earth—these are the truths that make us free. These are the truths that provide the opportunity for the flourishing of the moral agency with which we are endowed.

### **Necessary Conditions for the Understanding and Flourishing of Agency**

Based on the foregoing analysis of agency and the conceptual problems that surround it and in an attempt to take seriously the notion of agency as living truthfully, I wish to propose five conditions which I believe must hold in the human condition if agency is to be judged possible and if it is to flourish in the lives of humankind. I believe that the doctrines of the restored gospel are not only compatible with these conditions but require that they hold.

The point of this discussion is not to defend the truth of the restored gospel based on intellectual argument. The gospel is true despite all such arguments. It is true even if this analysis is fatally flawed. My point is, rather, to suggest that Latter-day Saints are uniquely empowered and should be uniquely motivated to defend agency and that Latter-day Saint social scientists should confidently be on the forefront of the intellectual fray regarding agency. We should be confident and eager not only to defend agency but to take up the challenge of legitimating it in intellectual discourse. We should proactively incorporate into our therapeutic practice the power of agentic concepts. We should teach our brothers and sisters about their agency and help them to flourish as moral agents.

I will propose five conditions of our humanity—five things which must be true of us and our world—in order for human agency to be possible and intelligible in any account of human action. I will attempt to express these conditions, where appropriate, by including references to scriptures reflecting the light and knowledge of the Restoration. Owing to the truths of the Restoration, we are, of all people, richly blessed in being able to understand our agency.

**1. We are preexistent, eternal, intelligent beings.** This is the ontology from which any adequate understanding and explanation of human agency and action must begin. It is an ontology bequeathed to us as our heritage from the Restoration. The Doctrine and Covenants (D&C 93:29–31) informs us that

man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be. 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.

Our capacity for intelligent action (to have reasons, to desire, and to judge) is not a derived attribute merely coincidentally attached to us through some more fundamental entity or process. Nor does it evolve over time from something more primitive. It is the very essence of our being. By virtue of being the kind of beings we are, we are intelligent; and it is in being intelligent that we are the kind of beings we are. I take this to mean that we are intelligent in a way very much like light is light. If our capacity for intelligent action,

which is at the heart of any conception of agency, were shown to derive from something else outside of our being who and what we are—say, from something nonintelligent or something other than ourselves—then such agency would necessarily be constrained—bounded—by the constitutive attributes of that more fundamental thing. This conception of agency as derivative provides no ultimate meaning and only a limited freedom. In contrast, I posit that the agency of an eternal intelligent being is as absolute as the eternity of that being.

It is common, almost required, in contemporary intellectual circles to suggest that human action and intelligence itself emerge or evolve from nonintelligent processes and structures, most often from the meat and chemicals of the nervous system. That there is no evidence for this, nor any persuasive theory of how this might happen—of how intelligence might arise from nonintelligence—is one of the most important and yet widely ignored questions with which psychology should concern itself. The doctrine of eternal, uncreated intelligence provides the most credible and expansive explanation of human action and agency. Indeed, without the assumption that we are eternal intelligences, no adequate theory of meaningful action and agency is possible.

**2. We are the kind of beings who act rather than the kind which are acted upon.** In 2 Ne. 2:14, we encounter another aspect of the fundamental ontology of our being human, closely related to the previous one:

And now, my sons, I speak unto you these things for your profit and learning; for there is a God, and he hath created all things, both the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are, both things to act and things to be acted upon.

I take from this that it is legitimate to speak of two categories of created things: things having the fundamental character to act and those whose fundamental character is to be acted upon. While we may not be the only such beings, we may be confident that we are the type of beings the fundamental nature of which is to act. What this means, I believe, is that we are innately and eternally the kind of beings who are not swept into action without our own participation. We are not the sort of beings who become what we are by being

done unto. We are the sort of beings whose acts require our active assent and participation. This is not to say that all actions are deliberated and absolutely controlled by us—chosen through an act of absolutely free choice—for such choice has been shown to be impossible. Nevertheless, even under conditions of limited options and distorted understandings, our actions, however inadequate and ineffectual, however much they may be a capitulation to circumstance, *are acts* of capitulation in which we must actively participate and to which we must assent. Nothing moves us without our participation and our assent. This is essential for any account of agency.

If ever we were to become the type of beings whose fundamental mode of being is to be acted upon, we would cease in that moment to be agents. Our agency would be lost. This is not to say that we are not acted upon in any way at all; gravity, for instance, acts upon us, as do microorganisms and natural processes of growth and decay. However, in our activity as human beings, children of God, we are not acted upon in our meaningful actions in the way that natural objects in the world are acted upon by any number of natural processes and events. Being eternal intelligences in a mortal created state, all of our intelligent and moral acts are, by definition, acts, because it is fundamental to our nature to act in just these most important matters. In these meaningful acts we are not acted upon in the way natural objects are acted upon.

In a talk published in *BYU Studies* some years ago, Elder Dallin H. Oaks (1988) made a distinction between agency and freedom. He taught that, while our freedom to act and control ourselves and our destiny could be lost or surrendered, our agency, our right and power to act for ourselves, could not. It is a constant and can never be destroyed. I take this to be compatible with this proposed second condition of agency. Our agency both requires and consists of our being the type of beings who act rather than the type which is acted upon. Because this is an ontological reality, it cannot ever be lost, changed, or stolen from us. Nothing can happen to us to change us from the type of beings who act to the type which are acted upon. How this plays out in our lives—how our freedom is manifest—given our choices, our sins, and other challenges we face, is, in each individual, yet to be determined. Thus our freedom, but not our agency, is a fragile thing.

**3. Agency and freedom require truth.** Even though we are always the kind of beings who act, who must actively assent to their own actions, we might still ask what we need to empower us so that being this kind of being matters and exalts. We need truth. The foregoing analysis demonstrated that agency cannot be understood simply as choice. Agency will be manifest in its most meaningful form as living truthfully if for no other reason than choices made without truth are neither moral nor meaningful, and thus agency would lose its purpose and, therefore, cease to be agency. Understanding agency as living truthfully, however, does not complete the analysis. We must do more than just turn the question of agency into the question of truth and leave it there. We need to push the analysis a step further and talk about the kind of truth that can serve as the catalyst for agentic living. An adequate analysis of truth is beyond the scope and reach of this paper. Here we can make only the most important points—and these only by assertion.

Agency as living truthfully is an activity more profound than the mere possession of information. I assert this because we are more than information-processing mechanisms and because the possession of information that can be judged as truth still requires a person to decide that it is true and then act upon it—which process is an agentic one. Thus suggesting that agency arises from the mere possession of information begs the question of agency because agency must be invoked to explain how information can be evaluated and judged such that it might result in agentic action.

The knowledge of truth that is constitutive of agency is much closer to the sort of knowledge Socrates described in his famous declaration that “to know the good is to do the good.” Knowing itself is an agentic act. It requires our assent and our active participation. I take this to be part of what is meant in the scriptural passage (D&C 93:24), “And truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come.” Later in the same section (D&C 93:39), we learn that “that wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth through disobedience, from the children of men, and because of the tradition of their fathers.” If the loss of truth results from our disobedience and our participation in traditions, then we can reasonably entertain the presumption that

we apprehend truth through obedience and participation in other traditions (D&C 93:27). These are active processes far beyond the simple possession of information and propositions.

Given that agency is integrally bound up with truth, our agency requires a source of truth. Because the sort of truth that pervades our agency transcends mere information, the source of truth must transcend propositions and arguments—the forms of information. The ultimate source of truth, and thus the ultimate guarantor of agency, is God, and this truth is rendered available to us through the actions of the Spirit. Again, in section 93 (v. 26) the Lord proclaims, “The Spirit of truth is of God. I am the Spirit of truth.” The embodied God of the Restoration is the ultimate grounds of truth. He intervenes in the world and in our lives, and through the medium of the Spirit, the truth entailed in his doing so is apprehended. Surely one of the most profound and welcome messages of the Restoration is that truth is restored through the intervention of the living God, who has established the fullness of the gifts of the Spirit through which truth can flow freely.

*Agency*

There are other media through which truth is made available to people. Some of these are prophets and scriptures. We also, as we enter into truthful conversations with others, provide truth. In this way, we are the guardians and nurturers of others’ agency. We can also interfere with others’ agency as we become sources of untruth and invite others to construct, inhabit, and maintain false worlds. Thus to Latter-day Saints the understanding of agency is much more than an interesting intellectual project. It is an essential part of our Heavenly Father’s plan. We are called to move beyond analytical understanding of agency. We are called, as fully as we are able, to cause agency to increase in the lives of our brothers and sisters.

**4. Agency requires a moral sphere in which to operate.** Once we recognize that agency is bound up in living truthfully, it becomes apparent this cannot happen except in a world where truth and falsity are ever before us (2 Ne. 2:11–30). This is to say that we must occupy a moral world, a world in which things matter, in which things, including our actions, can be judged as good or bad, right or wrong—a world of qualitative distinctions. If this were not the case then our “living truthfully” would have no meaning and we could

not be agents. In such a world, we might be confronted with a bewildering array of choices, but we could not discern any of them as “worth choosing” (Rieff, 1966). In a world where nothing is worth choosing, agency has no meaning. We are reminded here again of the work of Charles Taylor (1985). He argues that the hallmark of human freedom is the making of “strong evaluations.” That is, human freedom is grounded in the capacity not only to make judgments and choices but to make judgments that one thing is to be preferred over another—one action is better than another.

We see here why contemporary relativistic doctrines not only erode our sense of community and our moral compass, but they destroy our agency as well. If there is no moral grounding in human life, manifest in the making and having of strong evaluations, there can be no agency in human life either. If we lose our morality, we lose our agency. This understanding exposes the tragic and cynical lie perpetuated by contemporary doctrines suggesting that the overthrow of morality is the path to freedom and enhanced agency. Without a genuinely moral world, strong intentions would be impossible and actions would have no moral cast. There would thus be no basis for agentive acts. The ultimate act of freedom is the act of giving ourselves over to a moral authority greater than our own because this is the strongest kind of strong evaluation (Williams, 2002).<sup>8</sup>

**5. Agency requires freedom of choice of a particular kind.**

The final requirement for the manifestation of agency, as well as for the understanding of agency, is that we must have a certain freedom of choice in our actions. It must be clarified, however, that freedom of choice is not the same thing as “free choice,” defined as the capacity for completely ungrounded choices. As we have seen, that type of ultimately free and ungrounded choice is both undesirable and impossible.

Perhaps more descriptive than the phrase “freedom of choice” would be “freedom of action.” I refer to the type of freedom spoken of in Helaman 14:30–31:

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8. The phenomenologist, Emmanuel Levinas, talked about freedom as surrender to the moral authority inherently resident in the face of the other (1981). The analysis presented here is informed by his work (see also Williams, in press).



And now remember, remember, my brethren, that whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself; and whosoever doeth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for behold, ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free.

He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil, and he hath given unto you that ye might choose life or death; and ye can do good and be restored unto that which is good, or have that which is good restored unto you; or ye can do evil, and have that which is evil restored unto you.

If we were not permitted to act, if our choices—which reflect the breadth and depth of our knowledge of truth, our agency—were not respected, our capacity for moral action would be eliminated. We should remember here that we are considering not only overt behaviors but the acts of desiring, judging, and assenting to thoughts, feelings, and understandings. If these were not respected by God, and to varying extent by others, there would be no possibility in our lives and no moral action. If we were not allowed to act as agents and put into effect our understandings, desires, and feelings in many kinds of overt, as well as more subtle, actions, our agency would be impotent, and we could have no moral effect. If we had no moral effect on ourselves or others, there would, in effect, be no moral world, and thus no place for agency.

Freedom of choice is a great gift. I believe this is part of what we should understand from Alma's discourse on the atonement of Jesus Christ, the plan of salvation, and the meaning of "restoration" (Alma 42:10–28). In part of this discourse (vv. 17–22), we read the following:

Now, how could a man repent except he should sin? How could he sin if there were no law? How could there be a law save there was a punishment? Now, there was a punishment affixed, and a just law given, which brought remorse of conscience unto man. Now, if there was no law given—if a man murdered he should die—would he be afraid he would die if he should murder? And also, if there was no law given against sin men would not be afraid to sin. And if there was no law given, if men sinned what could justice do, or mercy either, for they would have no claim upon the creature? But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted.

And later we find the conclusion of Alma's analysis and a statement of the effects of God's plan allowing for freedom of action (vv. 27–28).

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Therefore, O my son, whosoever will come may come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds. If he has desired to do evil, and has not repented in his days, behold, evil shall be done unto him, according to the restoration of God.

Only a world of moral consequences, made salient to us by actual consequences, can sustain and preserve moral agency. Otherwise our agency is impotent, stripped of a crucially important aspect of its morality and thus of its essence. There are of course bounds set by the Lord beyond which we are not allowed to go (D&C 88:38; 122:9). But within those bounds, we are permitted to act for ourselves, and our doing so is honored by God. We should recognize, as God does, that these acts are sacred because they are performed by eternal intelligences, within the auspices of the plan of salvation itself, and because they can have eternal consequences. We should also recognize that these acts, performed by us as moral agents within a moral sphere of action and honored by God, are the very acts which necessitated the suffering of Jesus Christ as he brought about the Atonement: “God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice” (Alma 42:15). There would have been no need to atone for nonagentic and meaningless acts.

### **What Should We Do about Agency in Our Professional Work?**

I conclude with the question “What should we do about agency in our professional works?” In psychology, as in other academic fields, we are sometimes unclear as to how fairly abstract theoretical issues can be meaningfully applied to our work both intellectual and applied. We are sometimes unclear about how the restored gospel impacts our disciplines and our academic or professional conduct. I am convinced that we will not understand ourselves, our students, or our clients unless we understand them as moral agents. It will be much easier to do this if we have a coherent understanding

of human moral agency. This understanding must be intellectually as well as spiritually satisfying and cogent. If we have such an understanding, we can understand people with whom we work and those whom we teach. We can understand what they are going through. More importantly, perhaps, if we understand what they are and why, we can help them understand themselves in ways that can open their lives to their own view and move them toward nobler and more meaningful lives.

In the classroom and in therapy, we must teach people that they are eternal intelligences, that they are beings who act, and that they are not acted upon as natural organisms are. We must teach people that they are living in a moral sphere, that they are here to have moral experiences, and that there is moral purpose to their lives and their experiences. We must help people understand that they not only have the capacity to act but that they both need and can achieve access to truth, which makes their choices immeasurably better and more effective. Furthermore, they must understand that their choices to act will be honored—within bounds—by that same God who is the source of truth. We must teach them that agency is having the world truthfully and that truth is available to all who will seek. The understanding of human moral agency is the path to healing. It opens us more completely to the workings of salvation.

This can be taught to members of the Church who share our fundamental understandings, commitments, and our knowledge base. I assert, however, that it can also be effectively taught to persons not of our faith because it arises from an ontology common to all. We must take up the challenge of doing so. It will require our best efforts and our most rigorous thinking. It will require us to challenge the canon and the culture of our disciplines. It will require us to stand against the tides of opinion and practice in our broader culture. But people of good will and judgment will stand with us. And all people will benefit.

If we who are informed and enlivened by the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and the magnificence of the light it sheds on every aspect of our lives do not defend and promote human agency in our intellectual projects, in our therapeutic work, and in our civic lives, I submit we have failed to appreciate our heritage. We will find our-

selves, I fear, cursing the darkness and suffering with the world at large under the burden of failed understanding rather than lighting the candle of restored truth and holding it aloft as an example to the world.

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