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### Relationships: Philosophical and Spiritual Foundations for Counseling

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# *Relationships*

PHILOSOPHICAL  
AND SPIRITUAL  
FOUNDATIONS FOR  
COUNSELING

*As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man.*

—Proverbs 27:19

At some point, every thoughtful student considering work in applied psychology asks the question “Does counseling really do any good?” Individuals considering seeing a counselor wonder the same thing as they explore the myriad of personalities and approaches available to them. Hopefully, experienced professionals periodically ask the same question and its counterpart, “How is it that counseling actually helps people?” More specifically, the epistemological question might be, “Why is it that a client is helped by talking with a counselor—more than (or as much as) one might be helped by taking a drug, reading a book, going to a workshop, or sitting down and talking to some other person for free?”

These questions and their nebulous answers have led a good many students, clients, and professionals alike to abandon applied psychology altogether. They also contribute to ongoing uncertainty among many about the efficacy of counseling. In my view, many clinicians seem to suffer from a combination of an impostor syndrome and an inferiority complex. They live in fear that someday someone is going to expose the entire effort as a hoax or that counseling will be proven to be relatively ineffective in comparison with drugs or other approaches.

These fears and associated defensiveness can discourage us from asking hard philosophical questions about our approach to counseling. I believe the only way to overcome our underlying fears is to become better philosophers. Only by addressing these difficult issues can we hope to develop a more solid philosophical foundation that directs and accounts for what we do.

The philosophical questions are multiplied (or so it seems) for Latter-day Saints and other Christians who contemplate work in applied psychology. Not only do we have to develop a rationale for the counseling enterprise, we also have to try to reconcile it with the philosophy inherent in the gospel. The self-contradictory nature of psychology’s underlying philosophies and the somewhat paradoxical nature of the gospel make the task of developing an integrated philosophy that accounts for both rather formidable. The purpose of this volume is to provide a forum to address these issues in a systematic way. Realizing that the task is large and our initial steps are small, I will begin by addressing the most fundamental assumptions we make as counselors. In order to do that, I would like to share a

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metaphysic or metapsychology that will provide a framework for articulating my ideas about the fundamental nature of the counseling relationship.

### **Levels of Explanation**

The underlying assumptions of a given theory or approach can be outlined by their level of abstraction (Patton & Meara, 1992). We can consider a theory from its most abstract assumptions about what is (ontology). These most abstract assumptions are related to certain philosophical and theoretical assumptions that are less abstract and more focused on specific phenomena. Finally, there are more concrete dynamics and observations that are related to the philosophical and theoretical constructs. Table 1 illustrates a way of conceptualizing these levels of explanation.

At level five, we identify a fundamental ontological commitment—a belief about fundamental reality. There is a long-standing debate in psychology and philosophy about whether human beings are fundamentally physical or mental creatures. This question is often referred to as the “mind-body problem” (Robinson, 1981). Aristotle, Locke, and B. F. Skinner are examples of philosophers and theorists who seem to rely on a physical ontology. Plato, Kant, and George Kelly are examples of mental ontologists.

At level four, we find basic philosophical assumptions such as determinism, hedonism, constructionism, positivism, and agentism. Such assumptions provide a foundation for a theory. However, they may be either explicit or tacit. Level three is the theoretical level. Included here would be the system of ideas that focus on the counseling process. At level two would be any laws or relationships that are part of the theory. Finally, at level one we have the observations and interventions that are inherent to the theory and the assumptions at the other levels. Like most models, this one has its flaws. For example, theoretical and philosophical constructs cannot always be neatly segregated into levels. Likewise, the number of levels is somewhat arbitrary. However, the levels of explanation model can still serve as a useful heuristic in evaluating one’s theoretical orientation and philosophical assumptions.

One way of evaluating a theory is to examine the consistency and integrity of that theory across the levels of explanation. The levels of

TABLE 1

## A Metaphysic for Evaluating Theories

Levels of Explanation			Relational Ontology–Based Psychology as Described by Levels of Explanation
Level	Type	Description	
5	Ontological commitment	Assumptions about the fundamental reality	Relationism
4	Philosophical principles	A set of assumptions that guide inquiry and theory construction	Holism, contextualism, agency
3	Theoretical psychology	The “system” of personality with its elements, processes, and relations and with its devices for maintenance and change	Primary dynamic is the tension between the inherent isolation and narcissism of the participants and the desire for connection. The system that informs and describes the counseling process would include a focus on the counseling relationship and other significant relationships—similar to the approach of some psychodynamic and existential models (e.g., Kohut, Sullivan, Yalom). The means of change is, at least in part, the mutually discovered contextual truth that is articulated in the relationship.
2	Empirical psychology	Empirical laws or law-like statements of relations among the categories and concepts of level 1	I-You perspective, working alliance, empathy, identification of lacunae (holes) and inconsistencies, focus on patterns of relating vis-à-vis the counseling relationship; the symbolic and dialectic nature of language
1	Observations and interventions	The level of scientific protocol, terms, interventions, and the client’s phenomenal report	Resistance, insight, truth, honesty, hope, leaps of faith

Adapted from Patton & Meara, 1992

explanation can also be used to help identify the implicit assumptions of psychological theories (cf. Slife & Williams, 1995). While considerable time could be spent exploring the philosophical inconsistencies of modern psychological theories and the common contradictions between a given theorist's theory of personality and her or his theory of treatment, these topics are beyond the scope of this paper. The purpose of this chapter is to focus on the philosophical issues underlying theories of treatment. Accordingly, I will focus on the ontological assumptions that underlie our approaches to doing counseling.

I have two primary purposes in this paper. The first is to make an argument for a relational ontology in applied psychology. This proposed perspective will be contrasted with physical and mental ontologies and supported by gospel and philosophical sources. My second task will be to use the levels of explanation to describe a philosophy and theory of treatment that are consistent with a relational ontology and to outline the principles and interventions consistent with such an approach. I will illustrate the implications for counseling by means of a case example.

### **A Relational Ontology**

The debate as to whether humans are most fundamentally physical entities or mental ones has raged since the times of early Greek philosophers. The mind-body problem has been an inherent dilemma in psychology since psychology's inception as a science (Robinson, 1981), although most psychological theories and most psychologists choose to ignore or otherwise avoid these issues. This reluctance has led to a predominance of theories that have mixed ontologies. That is, they invoke a physical ontology for part of their theory, usually the part of the theory that describes personality or pathology, and use a mental ontology as the foundation for their theory of treatment (cf. Rychlak, 1981).

The classic example of mixed or contradictory ontologies is found in Freud's theories. He proposed that ultimately a person's behavior could be reduced to physical terms. He was clearly mechanistic and reductionistic in his personality theory (Hall, 1954). However, when talking about doing psychoanalysis, Freud switched his motivational construct from a drive to a wish. He also proposed

that insight is the key to change, thereby founding his theory of treatment on a mental ontology (Freud, 1943; Patton & Meara, 1992).

Both physical and mental ontologies pose inherent problems for applied psychology. On the one hand, if human action is ultimately reducible to biology, chemistry, and Newtonian physics, psychologists should be actively seeking prescription privileges because the usefulness (or putative usefulness) of counseling will be short-lived and will eventually be replaced by biochemical and/or other physical cures. On the other hand, we find primarily mentalistic approaches somewhat lacking. In their simplest form, such interventions are reduced to saying, “Think differently,” or in some other versions, “Feel differently.” The means of change seems to be primarily a matter of individual will. It is difficult to identify the need for a counselor (or any other relationship) in such systems. In either system, we are left with my original question, “Why is it that a client is helped by talking with a counselor—any more than (or as much as) one might be helped by taking a drug, reading a book, going to a workshop, or sitting down and talking to some other person for free?”

An alternative to the mind-body problem is to consider a relational ontology. In addition to providing a foundation for counseling, a relational ontology is also more consistent with the philosophical assumptions inherent in the gospel than either a physical or mental ontology (cf. Slife, 1999). I believe there are both doctrinal and philosophical grounds for a relational ontological commitment. I will first outline the doctrinal foundation and then move to the philosophical foundation.

**Doctrinal Foundation.** The restored gospel is replete with evidence that argues for the necessity of relationships in the process of salvation. We learn from the various accounts of the Creation that it was not good for Adam to be alone—he could not progress in that context. The divine design is for individuals to learn in the context of relationships. The story of the Fall, or the Leap as we might refer to it, illustrates the value of having two perspectives in approaching a problem. This process is referred to in Proverb 27:17, which states, “Iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend,” and likewise in 27:19, “As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man.” More than mere poetic images, these

verses hint at the fundamentally dialectic and dialogical nature of relationships. They suggest a basic notion of relationship—that truth is found in the context of relationships (Slife, 1999).

The social nature of learning is also supported in Doctrine and Covenants 50:22: “Wherefore, he that preacheth and he that receiveth *understand one another*, and both are edified and rejoice together” (italics added). We learn from this verse that understanding one another is an inherent part of being edified. Incidentally, if relationships were not essential to the process of edification, I expect the Church would quickly move to become a virtual church and each of us could get all of our instruction and ordinances via a grand “distance-learning” effort.

Interestingly, we have not been so foolish in our society as to adopt a physical ontological stance in our educational system. We still seem to believe that there is a reason to have teachers and coaches, colleagues and mentors. Unfortunately, many in applied psychology have adopted a medical (i.e., physical) model that has, almost by definition, greatly reduced the legitimacy of our work.

The importance of knowing each other and knowing God is perhaps most forcefully made in the well-known scripture John 17:3, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” It is not surprising that the Jews idiomatically used the term “know” to refer to sexual intimacy. The inherent symbolism of the sexual union implies a great knowledge of the other. It also symbolizes an alignment of wills and a mutual willingness to “be true” to each other (Solovyov, 1985). A willingness to relate to God at a personal, intimate level seems to be inherent to the process of learning to become like him. Again, the process of growth appears to be, in large part, the process of relating to others, of knowing one another. Interestingly, in Mormon theology there is no such thing as an individual God. Godhood does not exist outside the context of a relationship (cf. 1 Cor. 11:11; D&C 131:2).

Finally, a scriptural description of what it means to “be celestial” gives us some additional insights into the role of relationships in human growth. In his vision of the three degrees of glory, Joseph Smith includes this definition of celestial beings: “They who dwell in his [God the Father’s] presence are the church of the Firstborn; and *they see as they are seen and know as they are known*” (D&C 76:94,



italics added). Apparently the process of becoming like God includes gaining the capacity for both enough empathy and enough self-honesty to see as we are seen by others and to know others as we are known by them. Again, the only means to such ends appear to be in the context of relationships. It may be that honesty and empathy are the keys to discovering truth in the context of relationships. If so, the implications for doing counseling are obvious and profound. However, before proceeding to the implications for counseling, I will review the work of a few philosophers whose arguments support a relational ontology.

**Philosophical Foundation.** As discussed earlier, the question of what is (ontology) has traditionally focused on two possibilities: the physical as reality and the mind as reality. My thesis here is that we can more readily reconcile the gospel with applied psychology by considering a third alternative: relationship as reality. Before addressing that alternative more fully, it is important to address the possibility of a spiritual ontology. One might suggest that the ultimate reality is spirit or the soul. The scriptures are clear in declaring that all things are spiritual (Moses 3:6) and that all spirit is matter (D&C 131:7–8). I certainly would not dispute the fundamentally spiritual nature of all God’s creations. However, in order to determine what is *most* basic I would ask the following, “Does the spiritual nature of human beings (or premortal or postmortal beings) have any meaning without assuming that relationships exist?” I propose that someone’s or something’s spirituality has meaning only in the context of a relationship—at the most basic level, of a relationship with God. Establishing relationships as the most fundamental reality does not preclude the reality of physical things, mental constructs, or spiritual presence and connections. Rather, having relationships as one’s fundamental reality implies that physical things, mental constructs, and spiritual experiences are to be understood in light of relationships.

One philosopher who tried to reconcile the physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual aspects was Vladimir Solovyov (1985). He proposed that physical realities serve as both a metaphor and a barrier to our attempt at “true being” (p. 106). He said that our physical being imposes two seemingly impenetrable barriers. The first is impenetrability of time. We are tied to a linear temporal

existence, in which we have access only to the present. Secondly, we experience impenetrability of space. We are distinct and alone as physical beings. Solovyov proposed that sexual love is the metaphor that demonstrates how we can overcome these apparent physical barriers to true being:

If the root of false existence consists in impenetrability, i.e., in the mutual exclusion of beings by each other, then true life is to live in another as in oneself, or to find in another the positive and absolute fulfillment of one's own being. The basis and type of this true life remains and always will remain sexual or conjugal love. (Solovyov, 1985, p. 112)

Solovyov (1985) proposed that a fundamental “egoism” or narcissism is inherent in the human condition. That is, one's physical separation from others (i.e., impenetrability) requires that we each deal with the paradox of our separateness and connectedness to each other. He argued that the degree to which one is able to overcome one's narcissistic isolation and invest oneself in others is the measure of one's truthfulness in being:

Recognizing in love the truth of another, not abstractly, but essentially, transferring in deed the center of our life beyond the limits of our empirical personality, we, by so doing, reveal and realize our own real truth, our own absolute significance, which consists just in our capacity to transcend the borders of our factual phenomenal being, in our capacity to live not only in ourselves but also in another. (Solovyov, 1985, p. 45)

Solovyov also introduced an important aspect of a relational ontology—the construct of faith. He argued that relationships are essentially ongoing leaps of faith. In fact, hope, charity, and faith are all aspects of a relational ontology. True faith, hope, and charity have meaning only in the context of relationships. The constructs of faith and hope will be discussed later as theoretical constructs within a relational ontology that have implications for our interventions with clients.

Emmanuel Levinas (1998) proposed that human relationship is the most fundamental philosophical construct. He argued against the ontological assumptions of modern cognitive theorists and even questioned the assumptions of the phenomenological philosophers

because they relied primarily on a mental ontology. That is, they supposed the mind, or some other individual aspect, to be the most fundamental construct. While these cognitive theorists suppose that human relationships are dependent on the mind or being of the individual, Levinas proposed that the mind (including one's sense of self, language, etc.) was dependent on the relational nature of human being.

Levinas's philosophy has a number of implications for the philosophy and theories of applied psychology. One of the implications of an approach to being that requires relinquishing one's separateness and narcissism or egoism is that human beings can be viewed as equally valuable. Levinas (1985) argued that the capacity for unity or closeness in a relationship is a function of individuals' sense of (or hope for) equality. Because we can, by our approach to another, either create or limit opportunities for more truthful being, Levinas suggests that "facing" another person is by definition an ethical situation. Each person we encounter presents us with the dilemma of either honestly engaging him or her as a human being or engaging that person as something else.

Buber (1970) delineated the ethical nature of human encounter by proposing two ways of being. He suggested that either we engage others as valid, legitimate beings with whom we share an ethical responsibility or we view others as objects and thereby limit the authenticity of our encounter with them. In his seminal work, *I and Thou*, Buber used two phrases or word constructions to articulate his point. He referred to a relational way of being as "I-You" and the more distant and objectifying way of being as "I-It." These are not merely semantic constructions to Buber. Rather they are linguistic reflections of a fundamental (ontological) difference in the ways that we engage others. Buber (1970) articulated the I-You way of being as follows:

When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. He is no longer He or She, limited by other Hes and Shes, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighborless and seamless, he is You and fills the

firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he, but everything else lives in his light. (p. 59)

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Another basic tenet of Buber's thesis is that inauthentic, or I-It, relationships are the bases for self-deceptions and self-contradictions. He wrote:

When man does not test the *a priori* of relation in the world, working out and actualizing the innate You in what he encounters, it turns inside. Then it unfolds through the unnatural, impossible object, the I—which is to say that it unfolds where there is no room for it to unfold. Thus the confrontation within the self comes into being, and this cannot be relation, presence, the current of reciprocity, but only self-contradiction. (p. 119)

In other words, Buber proposed that one's reluctance to honestly engage others in the I-You relationship not only limits one's growth but actually damages one's self by compounding and expanding self-deceptions. This pattern is often obvious in clients who descend in the vicious cycle of social isolation and self-deceptions.

Buber leads us back to my original question about the legitimacy of counseling. To review, the question is, "How is it that a client is helped by talking with a counselor—any more than (or as much as) one might be helped by taking a drug, reading a book, going to a workshop, or sitting down and talking to some other person for free?" The arguments made in this paper suggest that human relations are the fundamental reality of our existence. They are the means of spiritual growth and emotional and mental learning. Finally, one's refusal to do honest relationships leads to self-deceptions and self-contradictions. Accordingly, the counseling relationship can be seen as a means by which clients can return to doing I-You relationships. Relationships like the counseling relationship may be the best, and for some things the only, context in which truth can be ascertained. I now turn to some specific implied dimensions of an applied psychology based in a relational-ontological commitment.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications of a Relational Ontology**

The levels-of-explanation model will be used to articulate the more concrete implications of a relational ontology. I will first outline the philosophical constructs that are consistent with a relational

ontology. Then, I will outline the theoretical constructs and possible interventions at levels three, two, and one.

At the level of philosophical assumptions, there are a number of constructs that are consistent with a relational ontology. Perhaps most importantly, the dialogical and dialectical nature of relationships creates the philosophical space for agency. This agency is not a simple freedom to choose, as it is sometimes defined, but rather a contextually grounded sense of possibility and the means of identifying truths in context (cf. Williams, 1998). Agency can be sharpened and expanded in the context of truthful relationships. Additional philosophical constructs inherent to a relational ontology are holism and contextualism. Holism is the proposition that an entity has primary meaning as a whole and that meaning is lost if the entity is broken into parts or reduced. Contextualism is the idea that meaning is made or imputed to situations and contexts rather than the other way around. Things and situations do not have any inherent meaning; rather they are interpreted in the social context. Both holism and contextualism support an atemporal and non-linear approach to relationships and human being.

Level three is the comprehensive theory of treatment (see table 1). Though articulating an entire theory is beyond the scope of this chapter, a few theoretical constructs can be suggested. First, a relational ontology suggests that the relationship is the primary means by which we have meaning. As such, the relationship can be the primary means of change in counseling. One of the means by which the relationship operates to facilitate change is by establishing a context for expanding and heightening one's sense of agency. A second function of the relationship would be to provide a context for increased honesty. The intimate nature of the counseling relationship can make one's tacit self-contradictions and self-deceptions more explicit (Polanyi, 1962). Accordingly, the counseling relationship can serve as a means to help someone appreciate his or her own context and establish a truthful way of being within it.

Level two is the level of subtheoretical constructs and simple dynamics. The approach proposed here would include the dynamic relational tension inherent to all human encounters. The fundamental dialectics of being known versus being unknown and trusting versus doubting are played out in the counseling dyad. The dialectic

nature of language and the symbolic nature of human communication would be dynamic principles operating at this level.

Level one is the level of specific interventions. At this level, a note of caution is warranted. Perhaps it is human nature to focus on the observables, the concrete. More likely, to do so is an artifact of a positivistic and reductionistic cultural norm. A relational ontology is not limited to a finite or prescriptive set of interventions. The uniqueness of each human encounter allows for a myriad of interventions that might be true in that specific context. However, there are likely some interventions that would typically be consistent with the assumptions proposed here and true for most counseling relationships:

1. The use of hermeneutic or other qualitative interpretation techniques to identify themes and inconsistencies in a person's narrative (Kvale, 1996).

2. Interpretation of the symbolic nature of the counseling relationship and other significant relationships. Constructivism assumes that language and human interaction will be symbolic. As such, the counseling relationship itself will likely be symbolic. While such an intervention is similar to Freud's notion of interpreting resistance or transference, it would not have the theoretical limitations imposed by Freud and his theoretical descendants (e.g., Sullivan).

3. The use of silence and restraint. By using restraint and allowing silence, the counselor can exaggerate the inherent social tension in the situation and thereby encourage the client to take the leap of faith into describing her or his experience.

4. Empathy. This encourages the client to honestly explore her or his experience. Coupled with restraint and/or silence, empathy creates the paradoxical context of risk and safety.

5. Immediacy. The counselor confirms the reciprocal nature of the relationship and invites honesty by commenting on aspects of the relationship that are left tacit in other interactions.

### **Case Example**

Mary is a 55-year-old woman who reported to counseling because of long-term symptoms of depression. She reported that she had first

experienced these symptoms about one year after two of her daughters were killed in a car accident. She reported that she had been more or less depressed since that time, a period of about two years. She said that during the year immediately following her daughters' deaths she was involved in her church and "felt closer to God than she ever had." However, after that initial year, she became less involved. She also said that she and her family had grown more distant. She indicated that her other three children were all experiencing problems with substance abuse and sexual acting out. She reported that her relationship with her husband had grown distant and somewhat surly. Mary came to counseling at the recommendation of a friend.

Mary's initial approach to counseling was not atypical. She reported her problem and looked to me for an answer. Mary's language and style in the initial sessions were somewhat deferent and even subordinate. It was clear that she expected me to criticize her and/or give her advice. Her accounts of her interactions with her children and her husband followed a similar paradigm. She reported endless examples of how she had told them what to do and their failure to do it had led to pain—just like she told them. Her I-told-you-so's were typically followed by her family members telling her what a lousy mother she was. These accounts were as shallow and lifeless as our counseling relationship. I proceeded with the hypothesis that Mary's pain was related to her reluctance to engage other people and other aspects of her life with an I-You perspective.

Slowly, as I refused to engage Mary as an object, she began to respond to my willingness to engage her at a more honest level. She began to talk more about her fears for her family members and her sadness about the distance between them. Over time we began to identify some possible truths for her and her family. First, we concluded that she and her family had been so hurt by the loss of their two family members that they had tacitly colluded to never be hurt that way again—because they were afraid they would not be able to deal with such pain again. This loss of faith and hope had shifted their previously genuine relationships to the realm of I-It. The distance between them had steadily increased, and each member had adopted a self-deceptive approach to life. Mary's personal approach

was to eat enough and reduce her activity enough to gain over one hundred pounds in the two years she had been depressed.

Our work centered on her being able to honestly engage me and focus on the essence of her life rather than launch into a monologue about the woes of being a good mother or a bad mother. Gradually, Mary was able to return to the risk of honest encounters. She began by renewing a friendship that had waned since the deaths in the family. She reported considerable anxiety about approaching her friend despite knowing that this friend would be very unlikely to reject or abandon her. This positive engagement was followed by some changes in Mary's approach to mothering. We determined that what Mary really cared about and hoped for was to have close relationships with her family members again. She began approaching her children and her husband as human beings rather than objects or roles. Her initial attempts were questioned and even mocked. But Mary persisted and eventually was able to encourage some of her family members to reenter a close relationship with her. Sadly, some of her family were not willing to be close to Mary. However, Mary's heightened sense of agency allowed her to understand the reasons for their reluctance and respect their right to be that way. It also increased her hope that they might change in the future.

I suppose that many clinicians will resonate with my experience with Mary. My account of how counseling was helpful to her will "make sense." It will be tempting to account for the changes in counseling in terms of existing theories. However, what I want to highlight is the fact that no existing theory of counseling would account for the changes in Mary's life in terms of her relationship with me and her relationships with others. Some theories would see the counseling relationships important, perhaps even critical to the process. But none would see it as the means of change or see Mary's willingness to relate with others as the primary indicator of improvement. Instead, mainstream theories would appeal to insight—either cognitive or emotional, or some other individualistic conceptualization. What I am proposing is a radical reconceptualization of human beings—one that sees the individual or self as secondary to the relational aspect of human being and posits relationships, along with their inherent ethical responsibilities, as the



ultimate given. Oliver (2001) provided an apt description of this reconceptualization: “We *are* by virtue of our relations with others. Our sense of ourselves as subjects and agents is born out of . . . relations. We can speak only because we are spoken to and only because someone listens” (p. 183, italics added).

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