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Reconciling Paradoxes at the Interface between the Gospel and Psychology

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*Reconciling
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Wherefore, take heed, my beloved brethren, that ye do not judge that which is evil to be of God, or that which is good and of God to be of the devil.

—Moroni 7:14

I teach a doctoral course entitled “Philosophy and Theories of Counseling Psychology.” In the course, my students and I discuss many of the issues addressed in this book. Students come to the class with varying degrees of experience and varying degrees of openness to questioning the assumptions and validity of mainstream counseling theories. Often, students who come with the most experience and already see themselves as “therapists” are the most reluctant to call these existing theories into question. I have been somewhat intrigued by this reaction because in my own counseling experience I have found mainstream theories to be sorely lacking.

On a different front, I will sometimes work with clients who have had considerable experience in counseling. These clients have often adopted a diagnosis or some other theoretical conceptualization about themselves. This adopted self-conceptualization may be part of their self-deception—their way of being that keeps them from being more real and present. However, like the counselors in training, they often hold fast to their conceptualization “because it works.” Now, when pressed, both the student counselors and the clients will agree that their ways of being do not really work all that well. They will confess confusion, desperation, and even pain because of the inadequacies in their “theories.” However, they have a certain comfort in their way of being, and calling it into question is unsettling at a very basic, existential level. I have often wondered why we hold so fast to things that we know, at some level, are not really working and are inconsistent with other things we know to be true.

I think that we tend to cling to our inadequate conceptualizations when we fear that to debunk them would leave us with nothing. Some clients live with tacit fear that if they give up their “theory” they will be left with no means of explaining themselves—they will lose their identity. Likewise, I believe many counselors live in fear that counseling is not legitimate at all. Or more accurately, they fear that someone will come along and say counseling is not legitimate and they will not be able to articulate how it is legitimate and will have to skulk off in shame and embarrassment. Most counselors know through experience that something very important and powerful goes on in counseling, but they find

traditional explanations of it rather inadequate. The purposes of this volume have been (1) to shake the foundations of our assumptions or, as Williams (1998) proposed, to “turn things upside down” and (2) to begin to provide some of the alternative foundations that will guide our explanations of how counseling works.

In my experience, shaking the foundations of existing theories has proven much easier than providing alternatives. In my theory class, my students and I examine the philosophical foundations of mainstream theories. It is a relatively straightforward exercise to point out both their internal inconsistencies and their contradictions with the gospel. However, our attempts to articulate alternative conceptualizations are typically more frustrating. Once students have critiqued existing theories, they often ask, “So what do we do then?” This book is an attempt to focus thoughtful responses on that question. We have “turned things upside down,” and we have provided some alternatives.

Rather than simply reiterate and review what has been proposed in the previous chapters, I will frame what we have done in terms of four paradoxes that counselors typically face. I choose the term paradox because one of its definitions is “a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true” (Merriam-Webster, 1986). I propose that these paradoxes are false dilemmas, seeming contradictions that are reconcilable.

One paradox that counselors face is between determinism and agency. Counselors are constantly hypothesizing how their clients’ histories have contributed to their challenges. At the same time, counselors are instilling hope and supporting clients in their efforts to show that they are not merely products of that history. On the one hand, if a counselor defines a client’s concerns simply in terms of its antecedents, the risk is that the client will define her- or himself in those terms. On the other hand, if the counselor advocates a radical free-choice philosophy, the danger is that the client will be blamed for having chosen his or her pain in the past.

This dilemma has largely been the product of thinking of agency and determinism as opposites. The dilemma is also fueled by our traditional reliance on positivistic models rather than dialectic conceptualizations. The alternatives proposed by Williams and Judd in this volume are means to reconciling this paradox. Their ideas

free counselors and clients to see that, while clients' histories have determined their present and may restrict their future, such restrictions do not mean that clients cannot live more honestly.

A second paradox is between truth and dogmatism. Counselors constantly struggle with the challenge of treating each client as an individual while bringing into therapy theoretical assumptions that provide models for how to understand and help the client. One risk is that counselors will emphasize the uniqueness of the individual to the point of dismissing theory, effectively becoming nonscholars—bringing nothing more to the enterprise than subjective hunches or a bag of techniques. This approach leads counselors to objectify clients or digress into mysticism. Alternatively, counselors might adhere to a theory or model so strictly that there is no room for alternative, creative explanations and methods. This monomethod approach also leads counselors to objectify clients and dismiss issues and concerns that do not fit preconceived notions.

Slife and Reber provide an alternative approach to the traditional aspects of this paradox. Their proposed focus on truth allows for both inclusion of the individual and the proposition of principles, patterns, and models. Likewise, Fischer as well as Yanchar and Smith have provided us with alternative ways of thinking about models that will allow us to theorize without objectifying.

A third paradox is between manipulation and nondirection. Historically, counseling theorists have struggled with the issue of whether they should have a clear set of values, a "truth" of sorts, that they impose upon clients or whether they should try to have no values and trust that some inherent aspect of the individual will be a guide to truth. The article by Slife and Reber and that by Moss propose systems that reconcile this dilemma. By focusing on interpersonal truth and alignment with transcendent truths, counselors and clients can more easily avoid the power issues inherent in traditional models. The chapter by Jackson also speaks to this issue. By using relationships as an ontological foundation, counselors can more easily avoid either objectifying their clients or projecting their own values in counseling.

A final paradox is between effect and efficacy. Counselors struggle to know what their purpose is—what the goal of their work with

clients is. With the imposition of business values through managed care over recent years, the measure of success in counseling has been defined as rapid alleviation of symptoms. This goal is consistent with the medical model of treatment. Most counselors are familiar with the dangers of this pole of the dilemma. If the purpose of counseling is efficient elimination of symptoms, other aspects of the person become marginalized. The possibilities that some people might take longer to feel better, feel worse before they feel better, or not “feel better” and yet find counseling meaningful and worthwhile are discounted. This dehumanizing effect has fueled the strong reactions among counselors and clients to the managed care system. On the other hand, if a more relativistic, individualistic approach is taken, it is difficult to account for the social benefit of counseling. If the only measure of counseling is efficacy—that is, the degree to which clients are satisfied with counseling or the degree to which individual counselors see it as necessary—it is difficult to see why employers, government agencies, and religious organizations should support counseling.

The chapters by Gleave and Gantt on hedonism provide some alternative ways of understanding the purposes of counseling. Likewise, the chapters by Richards and by Smith and Draper provide frameworks for including spiritual dimensions as legitimate counseling outcomes. These approaches provide an outline for understanding the personal, social, and spiritual benefits of counseling without dehumanizing the outcome or minimizing the positive moral effects for society.

Though the contributing authors of this volume have made significant strides toward reconciling theories of applied psychology and the gospel, there is much yet to do. There are certainly areas and aspects of theory that are left untouched by the authors. Moreover, the issues addressed in this volume are still deserving of considerable attention. Accordingly, I will point out a few questions that I believe are particularly worthy of additional thought.

1. *How is counseling within a gospel philosophy different from just being a good Christian in any other role or setting?* What makes counseling, counseling? We have proposed that effective counseling might include love and truth in the context of a relationship. But that still does not answer the question of what makes counseling

qualitatively different from any other relationship with someone who is loving and truthful. Perhaps there is no qualitative difference. If not, then we must ask ourselves if the enterprise is justified at all. The sense of most counselors and clients is that there is something qualitatively unique about counseling. We are just not sure how to differentiate it.

2. *What are the differences between being righteous and being socially and emotionally well?* We often slip into describing psychological well-being as spiritual well-being. While I am sure there are some correlations, I am also certain there are some differences. Can't someone be psychologically troubled but still be a righteous individual? Aren't there social-emotional problems for which the solution has little to do with being more righteous? Until we can more fully separate these issues, we run the risk of oversimplifying both social-emotional health and the gospel.

3. *How much can we reasonably expect from our theories? Can we expect a model, a set of principles, or a handbook of how-to interventions?* Most of us have come to think of a theory as something that covers the levels of abstraction from philosophical assumptions to observations and interventions. We need to determine whether we are asking too much. Is it reasonable to expect our theories to cover so much ground? Are there alternative ways of thinking about theories that do not require so much of them? On the other hand, if we are pushing for philosophical integrity, isn't it reasonable to expect that our observations and interventions be grounded in a sound and consistent philosophy?

4. *What is the connection between one's human relationships and one's relationship with God?* We regularly imply that there is a connection between one's relationships with others and one's relationship with God. We may even suggest that having a "good" relationship with God behooves one having good relationships with other humans. However, this statement does not take us much farther than the argument that being righteous will eliminate social-emotional problems. If there is in fact a connection between how we relate to God and how we relate to others, we need to articulate that connection more fully.

The purpose in asking these questions is not just to point out how much we do not know. On the contrary, I view the fact that we

have identified many significant questions and begun answering a few of them as a major accomplishment in the process of reconciling theories of applied psychology and the gospel. However, we do have much work left to do. Dr. Fischer and I originally conceived of this process as a series of symposia, which would generate volumes such as this one. We intend to continue the process. We encourage anyone interested in being involved in future scholarly work directed at reconciling applied psychology and the gospel to contact us.

Reference

- Williams, R. N. (1998). Restoration and the “turning of things upside down”: What is required of an LDS Perspective? *AMCAP Journal*, 23, 1–30.