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The Phenomenon of Christ-like Compassion in Non-Christian Settings: A Response to Gantt, Wages, and Thayne

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As a Latter-Day Saint and psychologist, I greatly enjoyed reading Gantt, Wages, and Thayne’s article regarding the Book of Mormon as a guide for Mormons in the diverse fields of psychology (as the “keystone” of our science, therapy, etc.). Although generally and largely in agreement with these authors, I would like to offer a friendly critique to extend this thinking into a way in which LDS professionals (particularly therapists) might practice their Christianity in non-Christian settings and do so ethically before non-Christian peers and in a way non-Christian peers might actually understand.

As practicing Christians, Mormons hold to a particular sense of truth or truthfulness; we believe that truth arises from a relationship with God, and that sense of truth perpetuates throughout the lives of His children because we all live always already in-relation with Him. For example, in 3 Ne. 13: 4 & 8, Christ tells the people that God “seeth in secret” and that He “knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask Him.” In the Book of Alma, Ammon tells King Lamoni, “He looketh down upon all the children of men; and he knows all the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Alma 18: 32). On God’s side, He is relating to all of His children, intimately aware of them and blessing them. Granted, His children do not always reciprocate that awareness, most living insouciant to His presence. Those aware of Him, however, experience deity in the world in terms of His immanence and transcendence. The phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion utilizes these terms to describe the Christian experience of God-in-the-world, and applies this term to our experiencing the world itself as well (Marion, 1998; 2002; 2004; 2007). Immanence, in this case, refers to the way in which God presents himself in the world, the way in which we feel Him or see His hand active in our world and relationships. Imagine a cup full of water, so full that the water level sits above the rim of the cup, and the slightest motion causes that water to run down the edges. This metaphor sits close to a theist’s experience of the Holy Spirit in the world, always cusping and sometimes flowing over in the form of love, comfort, revelation, miracles, etc. However, we also experience God as transcendent, the Being beyond infinite depth, that the more we experience of His love, the more we grow in awareness that He loves beyond what we can fathom.

Joseph Smith referred to the Book of Mormon as the “keystone of our religion” (History of the Church, vol. 4, p. 461), but the heart of that keystone is the atonement of Jesus Christ. All sense of Christian truthfulness arises from the atonement, and a uniquely Mormon sense of this truthfulness we find in the text itself and in the writings of latter-day prophets. Sterling McMurrin, a philosopher of Mormonism,
Moral agency, from the perspective of the Restored Gospel, entails the fundamental moment-to-moment engagement with others either in a way that facilitates the power of the atonement, or one that inhibits the power of the atonement. Put simply, moral agency entails loving more or loving less (compared to Christ) as we relate to others in our world. This sense of truthfulness that we love like Christ is an in-relation sense of truth, not a static sense of truth. We live in a world of others, in-relation to them, and in a world of God, in-relation to Him. This epistemology is an epistemology of practice, not an epistemology of empirically received knowledge. From the perspective of an epistemology of practice, knowledge becomes a process (a going and trying and trying again) not a static thing (once we receive it we know it). This process unfolds in the present context and in-relation to it, there is no knowledge apart from the context of knowing (Polkinghorne, 1992). For example, “love thy neighbor,” one of the two most important and emphasized of Christ’s commands (Mark 12:31), does not work under the mainstream psychology epistemology of received knowledge. Although we may receive knowledge of these words, their application requires an epistemology of practice and a moral agent to apply them. As we love our neighbors at church, at home, at work, the way in which we love fits the context of the loving. We love our children, for example, differently than we love our colleagues, and we love our colleagues differently than we love our clients. We love our colleagues enough to go to a dinner party at their house and to take joy in their company. We love our clients differently, however; even when they earnestly invite us to such events, we gently remind them of our role of therapist, and the importance of our remaining outside their social circle so we can provide succor for them which those inside their circle cannot provide.

Our knowledge proves constantly approximate, never fully certain, because the present context eternally unfolds and changes, and with it our exercise of moral agency eternally unfolds and changes (Cook & Wagenaar, 2012). Because of this we often experience tentativeness and humility relative to what the best moral choice may be relative to how we treat our clients, our research subjects, and our colleagues. This same humility applies to the persistent question in our daily professional activities, “To what end do I do...
this? Is this a good end?” As well as, “How should I work with this patient? What sorts of studies should I undertake? How should I interpret my data?” We understand the worth of these moral “shoulds” as we ask ourselves these questions in terms of Christ’s example, even what we consider “true.” As therapists, we do not counsel our clients to live a life that would lead to further bondage in sin, and as researchers we do not pursue methods of predicting and controlling others psychologically contrary to Christ’s example. As St. Paul blessed the saints in Ephesus, “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all fullness of God” (Eph. 3: 17-20, emphasis in original). The love of Christ is truth for a Christian, informing their moral agency in their world, a knowledge that constantly unfolds in our ever-changing contexts.

This understanding of truthfulness leaves practicing Saints in a difficult position relative to their work in a secular setting. The significant majority of psychologists, for example, do not participate in religious faith, leaving the faithful significantly in the minority (Plante, 2008). Although the American Psychological Association affirms the importance of religious diversity (APA, 2002), they do not specify that Christian epistemologies are welcome in the research and practice of psychology. The reason they do not include diverse epistemologies rests upon the difference between psychology’s definition of knowledge and Mormonism’s (or most religions). This difference runs very deep. For example, Gerald Corey, whose textbooks instructors commonly use for counseling and psychotherapy training, cautions his readers quite strongly to never impose their own value system on the client, and to be aware of their own values. In addition, the therapist should support the client’s values, regardless of the values of the therapist, and that it is the therapist’s job to manage any difficulty arising from a difference between the client’s values and their own (Corey, 2012). Managing these moral differences at work can be easy when the moral differences are slight or irrelevant (like when a client’s value system may differ in many ways, but the treatment goals work for both therapist and client), but can be quite challenging when the moral differences are large (when the treatment goals cause the therapist to compromise something he/she believes to be true).

By way of example, many years ago in my own clinical training I had clients (and still have clients) who live a different lifestyle than the ones supported in the Book of Mormon. I once counseled a client who lived with his girlfriend, and although I did not think cohabitation before marriage was ideal (which I kept to myself, given that it was irrelevant to the client’s presenting problem), both he and I felt motivated to help him improve his patience, understanding, and compassion for his girlfriend. My supervisor at the time expressed her worry that as a Mormon, I would pressure this client to conform to the principles of Mormonism. Only after listening to several tapes of our therapy did her worry decrease.

At the same time I counseled a client who struggled with his sexual orientation relative to his Evangelical faith. This client felt very strong same-sex attraction to other men in his church, and he knew that a few of them felt same-sex attracted as well. He felt very ashamed and guilty because of his ongoing temptation to reach out to these men sexually. Without critical reflection, I processed with him the value of his faith and the worthiness of his very difficult struggle. My supervisor expressed her displeasure upon listening to these tapes and gave me very explicit and direct instruction that should I wish to pass my practicum course, I should encourage him to explore his sexuality with other men. I pointed out to her that counseling him to explore sexual behavior with other men only addresses one part of the problem, and she deftly countered that only exploring sources of succor in his faith did so as well. She elaborated that much of his shame and guilt arose from his religious understanding of his sexuality, causing incongruence between his feeling (sexual attraction to other men) and his thinking (that he should not feel that way nor act upon it). She maintained that to resolve the incongruence he should follow with what he “naturally values” by “listening to his body.” Only then could he achieve “healthy sexuality” (sexual feeling and behavior without ambivalence or intra-psychic conflict). She worried out loud that my Mormonism prevented me from counseling him in a healthy way because I imposed my religious values upon him. Highly anxious about
passing my practicum, but also feeling greatly conflicted by her requirements relative to my own values (and the client’s expressed values), I asked for a compromise. I would present both sides of the issue and ask the client to explore them with me, namely the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing an Evangelical Christian model of chastity, and the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing sexual contact with other men. Although still torn, I also felt relief when my supervisor reluctantly relented, reminding me to provide her with a tape of that next session. I left feeling like the “intellectual hypocrite” Gantt, Wages, and Thayne refer to.

What I learned all those years ago in my clinical training is that Mormons who work in highly secular settings (like psychology/psychotherapy) can find themselves trapped between seemingly mutually exclusive and mutually incompatible truth claims presented by their faith and their professional field. From these mutually exclusive claims to truth arise equally exclusive moral claims about what we should be doing as a field in our research and practice. As Gantt, Wages, and Thayne pointed out, the moral agency described in the Book of Mormon based in the atonement stands in stark contrast to the determinism arising from naturalism, and both present different moral implications for research and practice. In the case of my experience in supervision with this client, I learned that some psychologists fear religious therapists imposing their values on their clients, so much so that the APA includes carefully crafted language about the role of these values in therapy in their code of ethics (APA, 2002). Likewise, I also learned that secular psychology not only assumes very strong moral positions, but that psychotherapy entails these moral positions constantly and un-ambivalently (Burns, Goodman & Orman, 2013; Tjeltveit, 2003; 2004; Tjeltveit, Fiordalisi, & Smith, 1996; Richardson, Fowers & Guignon, 1996). I will discuss which moral values (specifically) and disadvantages of pursuing an Evangelical Christian model of chastity, and the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing sexual contact with other men. As I discussed previously, this epistemology is an epistemology of practice within ever-changing context, not a de-contextualized certain knowledge proposed by naturalism.

This issue, certainty vs. uncertainty, lies at the core of the split between psychology (arising from naturalism) and Mormonism (sharing a history with Christianity). Both groups value fundamentally different things epistemologically, so although the Book of Mormon presents an epistemology, those who value the certainty naturalism promises cannot get on board with the epistemology of Mormonism. Likewise, Mormons cannot authentically embrace the epistemology of naturalism, because the assumptions of naturalism imply consequences for how we should think of our fellow man and treat them which Mormons would object to (man as a determined natural object rather than a moral agent). Basically, the study of psychology assuming naturalism is the study of the natural man, and the implications for how we research and treat others are likewise natural-man centric (Smith & Draper, 2005).

In the second example, my supervisor felt concerned that I did not reflexively persuade the client to embrace his sexuality by finding same-sex partners. Indeed, APA has offered unilateral organizational support for same-sex relationships (APA 2010). While we may admire the APA’s attempt to fight for justice, some of us worry about the lack of organizational lan-
guage around reconciliation of sexual minorities and Christianity, a language of sexuality tempered with spiritual faith, and looking to the greater good of others by tempering personal desire. Because of this, we find very little organizational help for our clients who struggle with same-sex attraction (or even those who have embraced their sexual identity) as they attempt to understand their place within Mormonism. This process seems highly uncertain and fraught with emotional and spiritual peril.

In this schism between the need for certainty and the embrace of uncertainty psychology needed to discard certain values in order to keep others. They kept the values associated with certainty (objectivism), and discarded those associated with subjectivity (like moral religiosity). As Richardson (2005) described, “Much of modern culture has been marked by this kind of ‘give me certainty or give me death’ attitude, which upon reflection seems to be neither realistic, mature, nor wise” (p. 25). Because an objectivist science fails utterly to give us morally subjective guidance, morals are regarded as individual, relative, and subjective. Indeed, the fundamental moral position of modern psychology is moral relativism and liberal individualism (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999).

Moral relativism, in this case, entails the assumption that morals, by nature subjective and uncertain, will vary greatly across individuals. For example, you can’t “know” that Christ’s atonement redeems us all in our suffering in the same way that you “know” that mixing baking soda and vinegar will cause a reaction. One knowledge (atonement) seems highly idiosyncratic and uncertain compared to the other (chemical reaction) which you could prove to anyone. Because morals vary greatly from this perspective, and people feel their morals are true to themselves, people should be free to believe what they believe in their individual lives and apply those beliefs in a way that does not harm others. This liberal individualism involves freedom to believe (liberal) and proves highly individualistic (individualism), assuming that moral understanding occurs within an individual, and not across individuals or in relation. Because moral values and a sense of “good” and “evil” mainstream psychologists view as subjective and individual, it does not fit within their need for certainty in their science. Indeed, when you examine introductory psychology textbooks, references to moral “good” and “evil” are entirely missing (see for example Myers 2011 or Cacioppo & Freeberg 2013 two popular introductory psychology texts). Psychotherapy, an outgrowth of this form of reasoning, always already entails moral relativism (thou shalt not impose thy values upon thy clients) and liberal individualism (thou shalt view thy clients as self-enclosed entities responsible only unto themselves).

With the value of certainty and hence relativism and individualism embraced by psychology on one side, and the value of uncertainty, moral contextualism, and obligation to others embraced by Mormonism on the other side, Mormon psychologists and psychotherapists find themselves trapped between two incommensurable moral positions. In my experience, many throw their hands in the air in the face of the incompatibility of these two positions. Years ago, during my clinical training, I had another supervisor who professed devotion to his LDS faith (and indeed faithfully maintained a leadership position within his congregation), yet simultaneously described himself therapeutically as a behaviorist. I queried as a supervisee how he reconciled the moral agency presented in the Book of Mormon with the determinism he assumed in his psychotherapy practice. His response proves typical in my experience—he presented a dualism in his life, in that his church life was his church life, and his professional life was his professional life, each with a different truth. When I asked if the atonement applied to his clients, he shrugged and waved the question off as “irrelevant” because that’s a “totally different issue.” In my opinion, indifference is the truest form of contempt, so I pressed gently about how he might reconcile his professional life with his personal life. At that point he expressed his frustration and ended the conversation. His frustration arose (I’m assuming, as it does for others) from the incommensurability of these two moral positions, that of mainstream psychology and that of the Gospel of Christ. Because of their seeming irreconcilability they pull for this intellectual hypocrisy, for this personal/professional dualism rather than holism.

But all is not lost—there is hope for LDS scholars who wish to holistically research, practice, worship, and serve within and without our field. Although rife with new tensions that will grow in focus as we attempt this process, tentatively I would like to offer compassion
as one way of bridging the schism between the personal and professional moral assumptions, and to give the epistemologists of the Restored Gospel a tentative hold in the world of psychology by which they may work. This endeavor proves risky, however, because psychology, as a field rejecting of the truthfulness of religion, will not listen to scripture. Hence, I will use the philosophies of men that are more commensurate with scripture to demonstrate how we might bridge this divide. I find this endeavor risky, because I risk the admonition not to mingle the philosophies of men with scripture. So, to work against that admonition I will start with scripture and will attempt to demonstrate how we can use these ideas to reach out to our colleagues in the world.

The field of psychology, particularly psychotherapy, makes it clear that when there is a difference in moral values (particularly religious moral values) the burden is on the part of the psychologist to either bracket her issues or handle the problems caused by a difference of values. However, when it comes to becoming at-one with another, differences can often prove helpful rather than detrimental, and we do not need to in-authentically “bracket” our values away. We see the most beneficial effect of difference in our relationship with Christ, as manifest through the atonement. Christ gave his life for all people (including our colleagues, research subjects, and clients) to reconcile us with God, and as different as we are from Him and each other, the atonement provides a model for reconciliation.

Atonement, in the case of Christ, represents the ultimate propitiation, a word which indicates the process of bringing two people who disagree into agreement, reconciling conflict, or bringing together those who have been estranged (Talmage, 2012). Christ propitiated our relationship with the Father, and offers His sacrifice as a model we can follow to do likewise with our fellow man, especially our colleagues in psychology (“as I have loved you,” says Christ, “love one another” [John 13: 34-35]).

The key to understanding this process of propitiation is love, which motivates God and Christ to reconcile all people to Them and to one another (John 13: 34-35; John 3:16; John 15: 13; D&C 42: 29; D&C 34: 3; Moroni 7: 47). In Romans 13: 10, Paul counsels the saints, “Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” Love is so powerful an act that it satisfies the law and brings us closer to God. Love also motivated Christ to condescend into mortal form, so that by experiencing the vicissitudes of the flesh like us he could better reconcile us with the Father (Mosiah 15: 5–9). In his letter to the Hebrews, Paul offers, “Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make a reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them that are tempted” (Hebrews 2: 17-18). The Father built into His plan from the beginning the process of embodiment for all, including His beloved Son. For it is in and through the flesh that we are connected with one another compassionately granting us the ability to understand one another in important ways, allowing others to matter to us deeply (in sharp contrast to the assumptions of individualism and relativism).

Secular thinkers, perhaps independently of scripture, noted the importance of embodiment as well, and the relationship between embodiment and compassion (Levinas, 1998; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; Marion, 2004; 2007; Mensch, 2003; 2009). Although an extended analysis of these philosophies would detract from my current presentation, a simple sketch of these philosophies relative to the incommensurability of the Gospel and Naturalism should suffice.

To these thinkers, our bodies link us and prompt us to share experience through two simultaneous processes, namely imagination and shared embodiment. For example, when we read the journal of one of our forebears, and she writes of her struggles with faith and survival, we can imagine that experience and relate to it. When she writes, “Today was blistering hot and dusty, the soil bucking the plow,” we relate to that sentence imagining extreme heat, the smell feel and grit of dust, the hard ground impenetrable despite our efforts. Likewise, when we hear the story of another, whether joyful or tragic, we relate to the experience of that other, through their story.

Similarly, we relate to another through their visceral presence, and as they register embodied feeling, we co-experience it with them to a degree. Imagine working with a friend, for example, roofing a house. As you stand to ask him a question, you see him strike his finger with his hammer with some force, and recoil from
the pain. You will probably wince as well. In fact, often times our bodies mirror the experience of others, as reflected in what some scientists call “mirror neurons,” the neural tissue that, when scanned, mirrors the same neural activation as the person whose pain we observe (Gallese, 2001). Although the naturalists within psychology have attempted to reduce our nuanced and complex empathic experience to these mere biological processes, they miss the richness that the whole context offers. In essence, we are beings in the world with others and alongside things all informing the rich context of our experience (Polt, 1999). As Merleau-Ponty argues (1945/2012), there can be no discussion of human beings without referencing the body and the social world from which it is inseparable. When I see another, I do not see them separable from our shared social world, like a de-contextualized object, but instead I view the body of another as a body like my own, capable of its own potentiality and of fulfilling its own projects. Because of this “the-other-like-me” experience, I can feel the same moral obligation toward another that I do toward myself. My existence, in this sense, is not a solitary one, but rather a shared co-existence with others within our social world. This being-with others in this whole context relates us to them deeply. As Mensch, (2003) argues,

Such universality springs from our condition of plurality. We are always already with others. To work with them, we have to anticipate their action; but this requires that we regard the world, not just from our own, but also from their standpoints. It involves our letting ourselves be imaginatively shaped by the latter. Given our lack of immediate access to their memories and anticipations, the attempt to do this is never entirely successful (p. 172).

Although never entirely successful, our connection to others through our mutual experience of having a body can prove very powerful to how and why we relate to, love and serve others. Levinas, for example, in Otherwise than Being describes how I resonate with the hunger of another, and I feel as though the bread I eat was “snatched from my mouth” as I share my bread to ease the pain of his hunger (1998, p. 100).

En-pathein lies at the heart of these experiences. En-pathein, the root of the word “empathy” comes from the Greek, and it means to “suffer” or “undergo.” Whether we observe the injured thumb of our friend on the roof, or the hunger of a child as we attempt to eat our bread, we suffer mortality and undergo all it brings together. As Mensch describes the process, “in its basic etymological sense, empathy is a feeling (a suffering or undergoing) of the world in and through another person. Flesh is our capacity to suffer and undergo. Tasking myself as another in empathy, I take up the other person’s standpoint, letting myself be determined by his situation” (2003, p. 172). This determination is not an agency-removing determination, but one that entails visceral feeling and experience. One that requires us, should we wish to avoid this experience, to actively objectify or dehumanize the other (Draper, et. al, in press).

Although these philosophers present a thoroughly worldly interpretation of the phenomenon of empathy, we see important parallels that may help us bridge the incommensurable gap between mainstream psychology and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As I stated above, Christ undertook the harsh vicissitudes of mortality which required him to undergo the sometimes brutal coils of the flesh with its incumbent temptation and suffering. Because of this experience of the flesh, Christ serves as a perfect advocate for us with the Father (Hebrews, 7:25; 9: 24; 2 Nephi 2: 9; Mosiah 15: 8; D&C 29: 5). Embodiment proves so important and so powerful that even Deity condescended Himself into this frail mortal form to better love His people.

So powerful was this experience of embodiment for Christ, so powerfully did it connect Him with all people, that He relates infinitely well with all people. In this relation, He commands that we then exercise compassion for one another as well, to the extent that such love for one another fulfills the law (as mentioned above). This implies that the ways in which we become caught up in moral differences between us and others pale in the importance of the moral virtue of love and compassion.

Empathy, a thin version of this deep compassion, stands as a core tenet to much of psychology and psychotherapy, offering LDS researchers and therapists a tenuous connection by which to resolve this morally incommensurable divide. The APA ethics code (2002) already entails aspirational virtues informed by a deep concern for the welfare of others. These virtues are autonomy (promoting self-determination in others), non-maleficence (doing no harm), beneficence
(promoting the dignity and welfare of others), justice (treating all people fairly), fidelity (loyalty, dependability), and veracity (truthfulness). The authors of the ethics code, inspired by these virtues, then attempted to codify specific ethical rules relative to each one. LDS therapists and scholars can contribute morally to research and practice of this ethical code by living out these higher virtues in their work and encouraging their colleagues to do the same. Too often people follow the letter of the law (the letter of the ethical code) and fail to live up to the aspirational virtues behind the law (or code, in this case), which can lead to great suffering (Mensch, 2003).

However, just pointing to, and living out, these higher and aspirational values does not mean that there are no differences in how an LDS scholar and a non-LDS scholar interpret and understand these virtues. For example, the value of autonomy stands as a central value in Mormonism and key to understanding moral agency. In the Book of Mormon Moroni raises the Standard of Liberty, a rallying call to all who follow Christ in those difficult times, which read, “In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children” (Alma 46:12). Freedom creates autonomy, or the ability to self-govern. Even today, we see the modern Church emphasize freedom from debt, addiction, dependency and the importance of self-sufficiency (see http://www.lds.org/topics/welfare for an example of the importance of these principles for Latter-day Saints). For a mainstream psychologist, however, autonomy means liberal individualism and a contradictory moral relativism (as defined above), or the value of looking after one’s own desires irrespective of the needs of others. The LDS psychologist has an opportunity in this case to present another understanding of autonomy.

Autonomy, to a Mormon, does not mean “I look after myself,” but rather “I am free from those things that would prevent me from loving and serving others.” This may seem directly contradictory to a mainstream psychologist, but other non-LDS scholars have argued for similar principles. Erich Fromm, an influential figure in the history of psychology argues that we need to concern ourselves not just with “freedom from” (oppression, disease, addiction, suffering), but also “freedom to” (love, grow, serve, develop, contribute) (Fromm, 1941). To keep our valid place morally in the field of psychology and to stand as a positive influence on our colleagues, we can gently and consistently work towards helping people become free to love, serve, and grow. Compassion, for an LDS psychologist, does not entail self-centered ways of being, which seem deeply problematic from a moral agency perspective, but rather an other-oriented way of being which gives our moral agency greater meaning.

We see this other-orientation in the LDS understanding of beneficence. To an LDS psychologist informed by moral agency, beneficence means doing good to others in a way that also increases their capacity to do good for others. “Good” then is not an individual good (my personal needs and wants are fulfilled) but a collective good (I’m healthy enough to love and serve others, especially those too incapacitated to do likewise). Beneficence then, entails not just seeing temporarily to the immediate wants and needs of others, but rather a concern for what will contribute to the collective welfare for as many people as possible for as long as possible. Again, this seems to stand in stark contrast with the assumed moral position within mainstream psychology.

Liberal individualism and moral relativism, as discussed above, did not arise in a vacuum. To offer a very brief sketch of another way of looking at the departure of these morals from shared in the western tradition to subjective and individual, I’ll start with Nietzsche’s observations that God is dead in the hearts of men, and that rational people (like scientists) killed Him (Nietzsche, 1974; Vanahain, 2011). As I mentioned previously, the quest for certainty required those who believed themselves rational to exclude uncertainty. Although a rigorous history lies beyond the scope of my current text, evolution of man seemed far more certain and rational compared to the genesis of a deity-created man. Therefore, rational scholars observed that evolution (being certain) informed their understanding of the human experience. Part of that human experience is the cultural values of morality, which vary significantly between groups. Therefore, they understood these values as relative to a degree.

Because all human beings are subject to evolution however, the forces of evolution transcend culture. Evolution entails survival as a universal value, and those behaviors that lead to survival are rational, while those that work against survival are irrational. Often,
pleasurable or enjoyable activities (like eating, sleeping, lovemaking) also facilitate survival. Some difficult or unpleasant activities work against survival (going without sleep, fasting, and abstinence). Therefore, pleasure became a “good” due to its association with survival of the fittest. When we look at articles in psychology, we see this assumed good quite frequently. For example, when examining studies on religiosity and well-being, we see that religious people had an easier time coping with lost loved ones, and better adapted to the loss (Keeley, 2004); adolescents who are religious have greater social capital, and hence are more academically successful than their non-religious peers (Pamela & Furrow, 2004); religious people suffer from less anxiety and have more coping resources than non-religious people (Shreve-Neiger & Edelstein, 2004); undergraduate students who are participating Christians are more mentally and physically healthy than those who are not (Francis, et al. 2003); religious children demonstrate better coping skills after a divorce (Greeff & Van Der Merwe, 2004); and people who are actively religious forgive those that have traumatized them at a higher rate than those who are not. Hence, religious people become happy again sooner (Leach & Lark, 2004).

In essence, this research demonstrates that religion is good because it promotes pleasure (happiness, health, success, etc.). Note that the authors in psychology do not make the claim that religion is good because it requires great personal sacrifice and suffering at times—that idea is contrary to their values. This has an unfortunate side effect in the field and in our culture. As Richardson, Fowers, and Guignon observe, “The direct pursuit of security and happiness, when it defines what life is all about, seems to increasingly dissolve the capacity to respect and cherish others” (1999, p. 51). The moral agency model of the Book of Mormon offers Latter-day Saints an opportunity to dialogue on this issue. Granted, it requires a compromise of us, as our place in this field often does, but we can support the research and practice around volunteerism, altruism, and service-to-others (see Sneed & Cohen, 2013; Haski-Leventhal, 2009; Musick & Wilson, 2003 for examples of research and theory in this area). Granted, for LDS scholars, the good of others stands as a good in-itself, regardless of the pleasurable or painful effect it has on us personally or collectively, but even within a field focused on the pleasure of the self we might offer a better way as we define it.

We find ourselves in good company within psychology, relative to looking out for the good of others as a value in-itself. Alfred Adler argued for a form of compassion and concern for others he called “social interest.” “Social interest” according to him “means feeling with the whole, under the aspect of eternity. It means striving for a form of community which must be thought of as everlasting, as it could be thought of if mankind had reached the goal of perfection” (Rychlak, 1981, p. 137). Although Adler uses the term “eternity” and “perfection” from the perspective of social evolution rather than the LDS understanding of these terms, we still see that LDS psychologists do not stand alone valuing compassion and beneficence and how that requires us to look farther ahead than an immediate need or desire. We have a position from which we might validly engage with mainstream psychology without deluding ourselves that psychology as a field will change its moral position.

If we examine the other four moral virtues (non-maleficence, justice, veracity, and fidelity) as Latter-day Saints, we find that we can share those values in good conscience and non-hypocratically. However, we value these virtues for different reasons and toward different ends than the mainstream. Our end, as LDS psychologists, entails doing Christ’s work to love and serve others compassionately, with a long-term view of what will do the best good for the largest number of people over the longest time. “Good” in this case, means Christ-like attributes He has commanded all of us to embody. For example, as I teach classes, write, research, and work in therapy I do so not just concerned with the immediate happiness of those who I serve, but rather the welfare of those they come in contact with.

A potential philosophy that might help us as we attempt to wrestle with these incommensurable values between Mormonism and mainstream psychology is dialogue (Bakhtin, 1984; 1986a; 1986b; 1986c; Moreson & Emerson, 1990; Baxter, 2004, Draper, Green, & Faulkner, 2009). Dialogue entails people coming together and communicating in such a manner wherein both are transformed to a degree. Given that LDS psychologists stand greatly outnumbered, it seems unrealistic that we can affect the field to a large
degree, but often times the small differences can matter. A method of facilitating this dialogue is to adopt an attitude of openness, even if our colleagues do not (Polizzi & Draper, 2013). Openness, in this case, does not entail giving up our integrity, but rather looking to how our deeply held values can fit into a given context. For example, how might we research in a more Christlike fashion? We would probably formulate our questions, gather our data, and interpret our results in a slightly different way, one with greater compassionate concern for the research subjects and interpreted from the frame of facilitating greater compassion. Likewise, for therapy we would counsel compassionately in a way that models compassion for our clients and therefore serves more people than just the clients themselves, while acknowledging that the best course of action for ourselves and our clients will not necessarily lead to immediate relief or happiness, but rather an appreciation for, and an acceptance of, some forms of suffering insofar as it facilitates compassion and service.

We could also model openness by humbly embracing uncertainty. The Liahona serves as an example of this. Lehi’s family found themselves wandering in the wilderness, much as we wander through our lives. The Liahona served to guide them in the way they should go in a day-to-day manner. Alma clearly states that this compass works like the word of Christ, which can guide us in a moment-to-moment fashion as we engage with the world (Alma 37: 42-45). As Latter-day Saints we can certainly use this guidance as we engage with our secular colleagues who will not tolerate references to scripture because it will point us the way to make the greatest good out of our research or practice in a way they can understand or tolerate. By doing so, we will actually exercise the moral agency that Gantt and his colleagues discuss, a moral agency that can inform the field through our efforts, and can certainly inform our own theoretical, research, and clinical work.

References


