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Can a Keystone Save a Broken Arch?

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Gantt, Wages, and Thayne correctly identify a number of implicit (it could be argued explicit as well) assumptions that accompany psychology and psychotherapy in their current state today—naturalism, determinism, and moral relativism. These assumptions are accurately shown to be especially problematic to the development of a psychology and method of psychotherapy based on the truths contained in the Book of Mormon and, as an extension, the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ. We concur with the authors as they quoted Richard Williams (1998), that the truths contained in the Book of Mormon and the Restoration have the power to enact a “turning of things upside down.” The existence of an active and loving God, humanity defined by their nature as moral agents, and the idea of being accountable for how we live in accordance to truth, are powerful course-changing ideas. Our main concerns and perhaps the themes of our criticism are wrapped up in two important questions: Why do we assume psychology to be the best vehicle of delivery for the precious truths of the Gospel? And why do we assume that psychology can be “saved” through the infusion of the Gospel at all?

Psychology largely appeared and became established in response to the breakdown of basic/traditional values. Williams (2003, p.4) spoke about the field of psychology as being “. . . thrust into the cultural breach to give meaning and stability in those very areas of life where religion and even the family used to function.” The problem is that psychology has chosen a delivery system rife with questionable values—as Gantt et al., have pointed out in some detail. This is where we find ourselves having much in common philosophically with Gantt and his fellow authors. We wholeheartedly support the efforts of Gantt et al. and others to challenge the underlying assumptions and questionable values espoused by the field of psychology. Another commonality we believe we share with the authors is a commitment to Elder Neal A. Maxwell’s (1976) suggestion given to LDS social scientists nearly 40 years ago to “become more of a link and bridge between revealed truth and the world of scholarship.” While we commend the authors to envision that link using the restored truth contained in the Book of Mormon, there are some important questions left unaddressed—even in an article designed to be sweeping and general. How can the precious truths of the Book of Mormon be conveyed through a discipline that takes pride in an objective and relativistic approach to human experience? What motivation does psychology have to work its way out of business by reinstating values that it was designed to replace? It seems a strong temptation, especially for LDS professionals, to attempt to infuse the gospel into psychological practice—with hope to improve it. The title of the article attempts to suggest that the “keystone” provided to the LDS religion can be translated and imported to become the keystone of psychology. Can the keystone, therefore, be used in this way to shore up an earthly endeavor that is actively trying to replace its inspired tenets with empirically supported treatments? What motivation might
God have to bless the continued existence of a human endeavor that has actively tried to usurp a measure of influence in His children’s lives? Whether moving from one language to another or from the religious to the secular, the work of translation and importation involves collateral loss. In the context of language, the history and cultural significance is often lost or never fully captured as a word is translated. Something new is born, a counterfeit that tries to show its equivalence by pointing you in the same direction—to a similar experience—that was conveyed by the original. We contend that a similar process takes place as we try to take religious truth to a secular realm. Much of the power and eternal context (of the religious truth) is lost in the form of collateral damage in the constraining and reducing processes required by a secular science such as psychology. We once again call Williams’s assertion to attention that psychology is thrust into a breach where it tries to counterfeit truths and experiences far too potent and sacred to fully imitate.

We must be careful, though, not to set religion and psychology as the poles of a false dichotomy—one is completely true and the other completely false. We take the stance that each is necessary, and taken together they make a more complete picture of mortality. Yet each approach stands on sufficiently different premises that complete concordance is unlikely (e.g. the creation/evolution). Religion generally holds out guiding principles, context, and aspirational ideals without much attention to mechanisms of action or causal relationships. These are the macro-level ideas that provide a foundation and direction to our lives as well as an overarching framework that allows us to comprehend the vicissitudes of mortal life. Psychological science, on the other hand, concerns itself with micro-level ideas without much to say about the macro—although a stated goal is to discover the macro by examining the micro. Psychology is more concerned with delineating order and predictability in the world concerning human behavior (and functioning results from micro-level realities) than it is in the origin of that order. It is hard to argue that attention to either the macro or the micro can be complete without attention to the other, but that is not to say that attempts should be made to study both at the same time and in the same ways. The authors identified three key macro-level ideas (existence of God, agency, and accountability) that should be incorporated into psychology. The complication is that in order to translate macro-level ideas into a micro-level science you have to acknowledge the collateral loses that will be incurred.

This shines light on a dilemma faced by LDS psychologists: Do we pare down eternal principles like the phenomenon of human agency to incorporate gospel truths into our professional work? If so, how do we “institutionalize” agency—making it a tenet of a theory (and defining it in terms of mechanisms of action or causal relationships)? Or, do we ask psychology to gut and rip out its own foundation? This seems to be the crossroads at which the authors would like to place psychology. A tall order for a young discipline that still after 100 years of existence has yet to solidify a common definition of its primary subject matter—the human being. Business as usual—compartmentalizing our faith and our profession seems to be the easiest and least painful solution. This issue is beyond the scope of this paper, but this example serves to illustrate how easy it is to let psychology continue to be a counterfeit of religion, a necessary evil that pays our bills. We cannot forget, though, that we do live in a fallen world and our friends do still suffer. We can use our positions, training, and skill to alleviate suffering. In spite of being a counterfeit, we can still use psychology to help people improve their circumstances. Even the worst counterfeit bears some semblance to the original, and there are benefits to be gained in the application of psychology. The therapeutic relationship has been shown to be a significant therapeutic factor. And even when the spirit is absent in therapy, we still have some things we can do. Let us remain humble, however, and not make claims beyond our abilities. (Let’s not think to create another system, or different deliveries within the existing system, (perhaps better, yet also/still a counterfeit) that we hold out as an approximation (substitute) for the original.) This paper, and others like it, is essential in the ongoing dialogue of professional psychology. We cannot do our duty, and respond to our responsibility, without calling attention to what is missing in the counterfeit system and asserting boldly what we believe will improve the human condition.

As we sat down to write a response to this paper, we found it relatively easy to compare and contrast the strengths of religious gospel-centered truths with
the shortcomings of psychological science. It would be easy to let this critique end here, having only spoken of the incompatibility between religion and science. But that would not be very helpful. In fact, that would be hypocritical on our part as we would be perpetuating the “business as usual” cycle mentioned above. While we cannot fully agree with Gantt et al., we believe this article calls to attention an important conflict between psychology and religion: Who are we going to allow to define the world and what it means to be a human being? The debate we will invite, but not finish, is to engage these important issues using the language of preference—because preference is the counter to contempt (Gottman, 1995) and the language of agency. Privileging either Religion or Psychology sets in motion a competition/fight that may be irrelevant in the end. While seriously presenting alternatives to be examined, and eventually chosen, seems useful. Stated plainly, our call is for discussion to be held in the arena of competing philosophies of what it means to be a human being on this planet, in this universe, at this time. We understand that all sides of any debate ultimately rest on unprovable beginning premises, and, therefore, there will be no undisputed victor. The value of dialogue is not arriving at agreement that one or the other side is more correct, but rather understanding between the parties as to what the other values and then the opportunity to choose a response to approach or distance in the relationship. It is the ultimate expression of agency to choose the basic premises of our lives and how we then express the operation of those premises in day to day decisions. This element of choice and consideration needs to take a more prominent role in ongoing debates.

We again acknowledge and applaud the authors’ skill at articulating psychology’s underlying assumptions. We also applaud the authors’ willingness and boldness to counter these assumption with the truths contained in the Book of Mormon, allowing us to envision a science informed by the keystone of the gospel. But, this approach belies a subtle but significant problem. Trying to import revealed truth into the science of psychology situates the processes of implementation, application, and evaluation under a scientific paradigm. We believe this will limit the importation process because all discussion and action will be dictated by the problematic methods and assumptions currently plaguing psychology. In essence, we are trying to set a keystone into an arch we knowingly identify as being of dubious quality, and secretly (?) wish to see toppled! This is why we suggest the scope of debate needs to be both broadened, and engaged on a different level. In a field with so many so-called foundational theories or approaches vying for attention, we wonder if anyone will care for the “Mormon” approach to therapy unless they understand, and choose, some measure of its sacred Source and how it changes what it means to be a being who is a child of God.

A good starting point may be questioning how psychology received the privilege of trying to define humanity in the first place: essentially trying to present itself as a “religion.” Although psychology deflects its action through deceptively decrying/denouncing its objectives as religious, yet it engages the essential religious questions and takes adherents away from other religions—essentially competing in the religious arena. Psychology arrived late to the conflict between science and religion as they have struggled for primacy as a source of truth and knowledge. Psychology has had to hit the ground running as it were in order to keep up—a fact that is reflected in the field’s shaky foundational premises. The assumptions underlying psychology, as delineated by the authors, inform the definitions of humanity as psychology attempts to understand the type of creature we happen to be. These assumptions also play out in the therapy room in the form of techniques prescribed to instill the values and skills that will lead to the optimal performance of said creatures. This is analogous to how the religious doctrines or revealed truths of the LDS church (or any other religion) inform what it means to be a human being. Principles, ordinances, and covenants based in these religious doctrines inform how we are to live a fully flourishing life. This is how psychology took advantage of the “breach” that laid before it—by mimicking and counterfeiting what held sway in the lives of people before the discipline even existed. This is where we need to challenge psychology and engage in the debate for defining what is. We need to not only recognize that psychology is a late-comer trying to catch up, but that psychology is openly rebelling against the more established religious truth. This rebellion not only calls attention to itself in order to garner some sense of legitimacy, but like all rebellions, results in the
creation of a new entity similar to what had been rebelled against. Rebellion against a government results in a new type of government that will replace it. Similarly, rebellion against a religion will result in a new type of religion—namely the field we call psychology. Once we understand that what is at stake is larger than merely adding new concepts to our professional discipline; we are motivated to question psychology’s legitimacy and authority to answer questions about our eternal nature. We are also more able to question whether it is possible, as psychology suggests, to compartmentalize our profession away from our religion.

Unfortunately, we do not have the luxury of waiting for these great debates to be resolved when a client shows up at our office door. Likewise, we are not all left to do the deep philosophy. We each can (and do) examine the ways the great debates and deep philosophy show up in the world. We can be swept along by the cultural norms of the day, be constrained by the traditions of our fathers, join with those we consider our friends, experiment with multiple paradigms until we find one we find adequate, look for something new when an old approach fails, or myriad other ways to encounter and choose a paradigm for our individual lives and professional practice. Stated in the most practical and pragmatic way: How do we get truth into the therapy room? While we cannot endorse the keystone approach, we do know that the most powerful tool a therapist has is himself in the therapeutic relationship. And by being a gospel-centered therapist (Gleave, 2012) who strives to live and embody the truths of the restored gospel, something beyond our capabilities can be brought to the therapy relationship. On this note we end by echoing Elder Maxwell that an LDS scholar should not only be building bridges, but “his citizenship in the kingdom, but [carry] his passport into the professional world—not the other way around.”

References


