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Richard N. Williams
Brigham Young University

Edwin E. Gantt
Brigham Young University

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Agency, Atonement, and Psychological Theories of Change: A Latter-day Saint Christian Perspective

RICHARD N. WILLIAMS
EDWIN E. GANTT

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

This paper interrogates the relationship of the hard determinism inherent in the theories and models currently on offer in mainstream psychology and the current trends in psychotherapeutic approaches. It foregrounds the seeming contradiction between the emphasis placed on mastering and incorporating discipline-specific knowledge – which clearly assumes scientism and hard determinism – and the emphasis placed on practitioners to develop a coherent theory of change as part of their approach to effective clinical practice. We argue that hard determinism and strategies for facilitating genuine therapeutic change and transformation are incompatible where there is no clear, coherent view of human beings as genuine agents. We further argue this is a particular problem for Christian therapists, and for adequately treating Christian clients. The problem arises because genuine human agency is at the heart of Christian doctrine and experience. Thus, it is a real question as to how well Christian clients can be served by hard deterministic approaches to therapy and models of humanity itself. The paper concentrates on the Christian doctrine of atonement and how Christian expectations of atonement can be understood in ways that allow genuine Christian commitment, on the part of both therapist and client, to bring about a positive contribution to genuine change. The conclusion is that genuine human agency plays a central role in Christianity, and, therefore, must play a central role in Christian therapeutic practice and theory.

The secular discipline of psychology has put its practitioners, those who practice the healer's arts, in a completely untenable position. Therapists find themselves in a position that is not only conceptually untenable but one that, depending which ethical code one subscribes to, may well also be ethically untenable (O'Donohue & Ferguson, 2003). The untenable position is apparent when we recognize

the inherent conflict between the two basic expectations central to contemporary clinical practice. First, clinicians are expected to be sufficiently conversant with the theories, models, data and knowledge bases of the various subdisciplines of psychology that they are able to competently integrate them into the real and particular human interactions that comprise diagnostic and therapeutic practice in order to facilitate

meaningful change and transformation in the lives of their clients (Lane & Corrie, 2006). However, at the same time, the endpoint of any system of therapeutic intervention rooted in the fundamental metaphysical and epistemological commitments of mainstream psychology (i.e., positivism, naturalism, materialism, and necessary determinism) is one in which clinicians and clients cannot but be reduced to merely complex configurations of variables operating in a closed deterministic system of causes and effects (Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003).¹ Thus, on the one hand, therapists are envisioned as being able to bring particular behavioral insights and scientific knowledge to bear on meaningful human problems in order to help clients make important decisions, attain deeper levels of self-understanding, and experience transformative change manifested in improved satisfaction and basic happiness and success. But, on the other hand, the primary theories and models that therapists are expected to endorse fundamentally presume human beings (whether clients or therapists) inhabit a strongly determined world; one in which all behavior and experience is the product of specifiable efficiently causal forces; one in which moral agents, genuinely meaningful choices, and purposive actions do not exist (Slife, O'Grady, & Kosits, 2017).

1. Perhaps the clearest expression of the grounding metaphysical and epistemological assumptions of mainstream psychology, especially as they are manifest in contemporary clinical theory and practice, is this one offered in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Abnormal and Clinical Psychology*: "Also associated with the modern paradigmatic nature of psychology are assumptions about science. These too contain philosophical roots in which the field of psychology as a whole differs from other disciplines. Consider the fundamental assumption of determinism. Determinism is the philosophical doctrine that what is being studied can be understood in terms of causal laws; for everything that happens, there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else could happen. Compared with other scientific disciplines that are concerned with discovering lawful relationships, such as physics and chemistry, modern clinical psychology, with its partial focus on subjective experience, is enigmatic. It recognizes that knowing *all* the causes of an event is not necessary for determinism. It is enough to assume that the causes exist and that as more causes are discovered, predictions become more accurate. For these and a host of other reasons, a multidimensional approach is required to achieve an understanding of the intellectual, emotional, biological, psychological, social, and behavioral aspects of human functioning across the lifespan; all of this begins with the underlying philosophical history" (Wenzel, 2017, p. 1644).

A central consequence of all of this is that any talk of meaningful therapeutic transformation and change ultimately becomes empty rhetoric. Although the therapist is often said to be a rational human being morally engaged in helping other human beings make sense of their lives and relationships, in a deeper sense – because of the underlying philosophical commitments of modern psychology – the therapist can really only be understood as one part in an elaborate process of "behavioral mechanics" (Dzendolet, 1999). In other words, the therapist is that part of the larger causal nexus of determinative influences that happens to intervene at the level of physiological or neurological systems (nature) and/or at the level of specific causal regularities already operative in the clients' environment (nurture) (see, e.g., Johansson & Høglend, 2007; Dolev & Zilcha-Mano, 2019). In either case, however, neither the therapist nor the client is truly the agent of change as neither is in fact a genuinely agentic being in the first place. Thus, given the reductive and mechanical determinism characteristic of the theories and perspectives in the mainstream of the discipline of psychology, the normative model of change is clearly a technological model (see, e.g., Heidegger, 1977), one in which people's problems are approached largely on the same grounds as any other technological problem we might encounter in the world of things. Of course, such a summary statement would doubtless be rejected by many researchers and practitioners in the discipline as being too harsh, or out of touch with what therapists actually do. Be that as it may, the larger analytical point we are making here is that no other approach (i.e., non-mechanical, fully agentic) to intervention is possible in the sort of strongly efficient-causal world that mainstream theorists, researchers, and practitioners in psychology study, assume, endorse, and, in conformity with the goals of their training incorporate into their therapeutic interventions.

Of course, the immediate inclination here is to respond that this situation has not come about in any intentional way. And, in a literal sense, if we take seriously the theoretical tenets and philosophical commitments of the intellectual mainstream of the discipline, such a claim must be granted. After all, within virtually all the dominant perspectives in the mainstream of the discipline, no human behaviors can be thought to be genuinely intentional – because our thoughts,

feelings, and actions are all said to be caused by forces and structures over which we exert no control, and of the operations of which we are almost never aware (Wegner, 2018). Indeed, deterministic forms of explanation are assumed by most psychological researchers and theorists to be essential for establishing the discipline's scientific credentials (see, e.g., Elster, 2015; Goodwin & Goodwin, 2017; Hughes, 2016). As Goodwin and Goodwin (2017) state, "In psychology, we ultimately would like to know what causes behavior (determinism), and it is with the tools of science that we can discover those causes (discoverability)" (p. 9). Similarly, in a popular textbook on personality theory, Crowne (2009) writes:

A cardinal belief in science is that the universe and all the things and organisms within it act in lawful and orderly ways. This assumption of determinism establishes the basis on which all scientific inquiry rests, and it is no less true of human action than any other events. So, we believe that all human behavior – the over things we can observe and the covert ones, like thinking and feeling, that take place unobserved – is lawfully determined. We may not know all the laws, but our behavior is nonetheless obedient to them. (p. 6)

In the mainstream view, then, "there is no need to posit the existence of free will in order to explain the generation of behavioral impulses, and there is no need to posit free will in order to explain how those (unconscious) impulses are sorted out and integrated to produce human behavior and the other higher mental processes" (Bargh, 2008, p. 148). Ultimately, if we take the mainstream view of the discipline seriously, what we must learn to accept about ourselves is that "what we don't experience, yet which are just as real [as what we do experience], are the multitude of unconscious influences and determinants of what we think, act, and feel" (Bargh, 2008, p. 149; clarification added).

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY

None of this, however, actually helps to defuse the underlying problem at hand. In fact, it really only serves to disclose it all the more clearly. Psychology has "purposely," with as much purpose as a strongly

causally determined being or group of beings can muster, pursued a scholarly course – reflected in both its methods and its explanatory models and theories – that has allowed it to remain firmly rooted within the domain of positivist science developed in the 19th century (see Bickard, 1992; Farrell, 2014; Gantt & Williams, 2014; Robinson, 1995). While empirical *methods*, per se, do not lock the discipline into positivistic or deterministic forms of *explanation*, the intellectual pull of these two perspectives has proven too strong for the discipline to resist. It is simply a fact of history that every dominant school of thought that has risen to prominence in psychology since its inception as a discipline in the latter decades of the nineteenth-century has theorized human behavior in deterministic terms that leave no place for moral agency (see, Bem & Looren de Jong, 2013; Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003; Robinson, 1995; Walsh, Teo, & Baydala, 2014).

Only two major counterexamples to this conclusion, with which one might make a case that contemporary psychology is not solely wedded to hard deterministic thinking, come readily to mind in the context of the recent intellectual history of the discipline. The first is the "introspectionist" psychology of the pioneering German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920). Introspectionism, at least as articulated by Wundt, was principally concerned with systematic self-observation of the processes of conscious thought and feeling. While Wundt's goal was to identify the underlying lawful structure and consistent nature of consciousness, his work was founded on the assumption of an active mind, the actions of which were in some sense "voluntary" or freely willed. Indeed, Wundt often used the term "voluntarism" to characterize his psychology in order to "highlight the importance of feeling and volition in understanding the mind" (Araujo, 2016, p. 207). Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons – some scientific, some philosophical, and some socio-cultural – Wundt's vision of a "voluntarist psychology" failed to take hold in the larger 19th and 20th century Anglo-American sphere as the academic and professional discipline of psychology was developing, and has, for the most part, been left behind by the mainstream of the discipline. As the historian of psychology Thomas Leahey (2018) notes, "Although Wundt launched

psychology as a recognized discipline, his Leipzig system did not represent the future of psychology Psychology's future lay with natural science and practical application" (p. 235).

The other counterexample is found in the broadly Humanistic-Existential psychology movement which arose in the first half of the 20th century and found popular expression in the writings of such figures as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Victor Frankl, Rollo May, and, more recently, Irvin Yalom and Emmy van Deurzen (see Schneider, Pierson, & Bugental, 2015). Additional contributions to this broad attempt to reconceptualize psychology on less deterministic and reductive grounds came from the efforts of psychologists such as Karl Jaspers, Medard Boss, Ludwig Binswanger, Amadeo Giorgi and others, to translate the hermeneutic and phenomenological insights of Continental philosophers like Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-ponty into a viable alternative platform for psychological research and psychotherapeutic practice rooted in lived-experience, meaning, and human agency (Spinelli, 2005).

The influence of this (broadly-speaking) "third wave" movement in psychology continues to be felt around the margins of the discipline to this day but was most influential during the first three decades following World War II. Rooted more in the intellectual traditions of Continental Rationalism and Romanticism than British Empiricism, this movement offered a clear alternative to the rather grimly pessimistic views of human nature found in Freudian psychoanalysis and Skinnerian behaviorism. However, like Wundtian psychology of the previous century, Humanistic-Existential and Phenomenological approaches struggled capture the disciplinary imagination of the mainstream, and, in the end, have met with frequent rejection for not being sufficiently scientific to warrant serious consideration.

As the memories of nearly half a century of global war and economic turmoil faded somewhat from consciousness during the 1950's, 60's and 70's, and as a seemingly softer (yet still rigorously scientific) "cognitive psychology" came to replace traditional behaviorism as the dominant force in psychology, humanistic and existential perspectives have also declined in importance. The "third force psychology" has come to be increasingly seen as "too philosophical" and, thus, as

an unnecessary impediment to, or distraction from, psychology's century-long quest to achieve scientific respectability. This evolution of ideas has effectively left the field dominated by one or another species of hard-determinism, whether neuroscientific, genetic, social-cognitive, or evolutionary (Ludden, 2020).²

THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

Theory and practice in the clinical areas of the discipline have largely followed the conceptual lead of mainstream research projects, with various "cognitive therapies" emerging in the 1960s and coming to dominate psychotherapy training and research over the past five or six decades. For the past three or four of these decades, the cognitive approach to understanding human beings and treating their problems in therapy has been increasingly melded with the findings and models of neuroscience (Naji & Ekhtiari, 2016). Accordingly, cognitive neuroscience, in one form or another, has become the predominate perspective in the scholarly field, fitting nicely within the long-standing disciplinary devotion to a "scientist-practitioner model" (i.e., the Boulder Model) that was formally endorsed by the American Psychological Association in 1949. The natural scientific aspirations and presumptions of the discipline of psychology thus continue to be widely endorsed and emphasized in

2. Here some might call attention to the influential research of E. L. Deci and R. M. Ryan (2015; see also Ryan & Deci, 2017) contributing to what they have termed *Self-determination Theory*. "That most people show considerable effort, agency, and commitment in their lives appears," these authors maintain, "to be more normative than exceptional, suggesting some very positive and persistent features of human nature" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Unfortunately, despite a seeming commitment to understanding human action in agentic or intentional terms, they are clear that "we consider psychological constructs, whether conscious or nonconscious, to comprise the *regnant causes* of most intentional behaviors. It is at the level of motives and intentions, and the experiences of *external and internal forces that instigate and affect them*, where the most relevant determinants of behaviors are taking place" (p. 7, emphasis added). Consequently, it is difficult to accept that, regardless of what one might be led to believe based on the name of the theory being espoused, that these authors (and like-minded others) in any substantive way value human agency above causal determinism in their attempts to explain behavior. (For a more detailed examination of the deterministic underpinnings of Self-determination Theory, and its incoherent account of human agency, see Gantt & Parker, 2020.)

training and practice (Beck, Castonguay, Chronis-Tuscano, Klonsky, McGinn, & Youngstrom, 2014; Norcross, Sayette, & Pomerantz, 2017). Clinicians in training are, accordingly, required to master what has come to be called the “discipline-specific knowledge” of the field, which knowledge – as the current field has come to be constituted – consists almost exclusively of larger (i.e., not strictly clinically related) theories, models, and great quantities of data from research studies of all sorts (Kramer, Bernstein, & Phares, 2019).

The underlying logic, as well as the great hope, attached to the scientist-practitioner model reflects the natural expectations incumbent in the applied branches of other established scientific fields. For example, medical doctors are expected to be broadly trained in medical science, and engineers are expected to be masters of the physical science that underlies the creation of bridges, airplanes, cell phones and other such devices. However, this expectation, as it is generalized and transferred to practitioners of the healing arts in psychology, becomes quite problematic for at least two important reasons, each of which illustrate why and how the discipline has placed its clinical practitioners in an untenable position. First, in the medical field, the basic entity to be treated – i.e., the human body – though highly individual in certain respects is nonetheless quite similar across the whole range of human bodies, and even across time. An injured knee, to use a simple example, may get better or worse across time, but it is fairly clear to medical science, when taking account of all knees, how any particular knee gets better or gets worse, and why. It is also clear, within a specifiable range, and allowing for periodical advances in technology, how to treat injured knees and how to fix them. Other aspects of physical health are similar, differing more or less only along two simple dimensions – complexity and etiology.

This situation in the field of medicine is, however, a poor fit for the situation we find in the field of psychology. That is, while one can study quite faithfully and deeply the current knowledge base of the discipline, when the need arises to apply that knowledge to a particular clinically relevant phenomenon resident in a particular human person, it becomes clear very quickly that every case of depression, for example, unlike every ACL knee sprain, is not the same

across patients. The effectiveness of various talk-interventions, unlike the effectiveness of stitches, or anti-inflammatory drugs, is not so uniform. Indeed, it seems fairly obvious that there are many more ways of becoming depressed and experiencing being depressed than there are ways of spraining or tearing an ACL. And more importantly, the ways depression may manifest itself and be understood by therapist or client are much more numerous than the ways in which an ACL tear can be understood, expressed, and experienced.

The closest psychology seems able to come to the fulfilling the aspirations and presuppositions of the scientist-practitioner model, that fits so well in medical science or engineering, is in the area of drug treatment. However, even in this area, differences between the medical and psychological are obvious, if for no other reason than, in medicine, we have developed many drugs that target particular pathogens or bodily states, and eliminate specific causes of disease, while in psychology the drugs developed are almost entirely symptom-oriented, operating roughly at the level of basic analgesics in medicine (Harrington, 2019; Whitaker, 2010). In this way, psychological science has put its therapeutic practitioners in the untenable position of needing to master a wide theoretical landscape and, hopefully, digest mountains of data, despite the fact that the conceptual tie between the theories and the data, on the one hand, and the conditions the practitioners will actually face and be expected to treat, on the other, has not yet been established by the field itself. Indeed, as Lane and Corrie (2006) note: “Of all the criticisms levied against the scientist-practitioner model, perhaps the most resounding has been that it represents a vision of professional practice that can rarely, if ever, be fulfilled” (p. 14). Citing the criticisms of Jones (1998), they continue by suggesting that “the scientific identity of the practitioner is in fact ‘fraudulent’ and should be abandoned in favor of a more honest account of how psychologists actually function” (p. 14).

The second way in which the larger discipline of psychology, because of its prevailing intellectual commitments, has put its clinicians in an untenable position has to do with the nature of the (presumably scientific) assumptions that inform the discipline-specific knowledge that training programs are required to impart to

clinicians-in-training. The scientific perspectives currently most in play in the discipline are all strongly deterministic, particularly in the realm of personality theory and psychotherapy (see Jones & Butman, 2011 for a sustained analysis of this issue from an explicitly Christian perspective). None of the predominant perspectives informing contemporary psychotherapy case conceptualization and practice give serious consideration to the possibility of meaningful human agency in either their etiological accounts of psychological disorder or their explanations of therapeutic change. Indeed, as Wilks (2018) recently concluded in his review of counseling theory development, “views of behavioral causality are fundamentally linked to the practice of counseling,” and, therefore, “it is important that the profession’s guiding paradigm rests on sound causal assumptions” (p. 219).

It simply is the case that neuro-psychological models and data are not offered (nor, indeed could they be offered) in the service of providing explanations of how persons develop and deploy meaningful human agency in their daily lives and relationships (Williams, 2001). Likewise, cognitive models are replete with the deterministic conceptual language of “inputs/outputs,” “mechanisms,” “systems” and “feedback loops,” and “automaticity” (see, e.g., Leahy, 2018). Even when some theorists grant that people act as they do for particular “self-determined” purposes and reasons, they then account for those purposes and reasons in fundamentally deterministic terms that explain them as arising out of the underlying biological conditions and mechanical processes that govern cognition itself (see, e.g., Gantt & Parker, 2020). For example, Ryan and Deci (2017) state that “Insofar as the causes of intentional behaviors lie in the necessary events that initiate and sustain them, it is the forces that ‘move’ people, as conceptualized within the scope of motivational psychology, that frequently supply the most relevant and practical predictive models and the most meaningful explanations of behavior” (p. 7).

Unfortunately, humanistic theories and models fair no better. Although such approaches often espouse agentic positions, they seldom go on to provide anything remotely approaching a sophisticated conceptual analysis or defense of human agency that might be deployed effectively against the necessary determinism, reductive materialism, and scientific

naturalism that has so captured the imagination and intellectual allegiance of the mainstream of the discipline. Thus, even while humanistic perspectives have been congenial to agentic language, and sometimes, even to agentic understandings, they have steadily declined in prominence and influence on the field, both in scholarship and practice. Consequently, what this means is that the discipline is training clinicians to help people with real pain and with real problems to experience real changes while arming clinicians to do so with a knowledge base that, in its very content and methods, obviates human agency and meaning. And it does this by holding to the suppositions of efficient causal determinism in its predominant theoretical and methodological formulations – formulations which, in therapy training programs, underlie the accepted protocols for how help is to be offered and how the help offered does in fact really help.

THE UNTENABLE POSITION

In the end, this is, in every way, an untenable position in which to place practitioners of the healing arts in psychology. That this unfortunate condition exists is supported (ironically) by a large body of literature – across a broad spectrum of clinical experience and settings. A key finding of this literature is that the most important factors in successful therapy have more to do with the so-called “process variables” operative within the therapist-client relationship – and, of course, the casual laws that govern those operations and their interactions – than with particular theoretical orientations and knowledge bases (see, e.g., Ablon, Levy, & Katzenstein, 2006; Gelo, Pritz, & Rieken, 2015; Johansson & Høglend, 2007; Lambert & Barley, 2001; Laska, Gurman, & Wampold, 2014; Tompkins & Swift, 2014). Indeed, as Lambert and Barley (2001) pointed out almost two decades ago roughly 30 percent of the variance in psychotherapy outcome is accounted for by the quality of the client-therapist relationship, while an additional 40 percent of variance is “attributable to factors outside the therapy” (p. 358). Indeed, in their summary review of meta-analytic research on therapy outcomes, Laska, Gurman, and Wampold (2014) demonstrated that treatment method itself accounts for only about 1 percent of outcome variance.

This troubling state of affairs makes one wonder just where and how much discipline-specific knowledge can really be helpful in therapeutic practice if, at best, whatever it does, it likely does as part of those therapeutic effects occurring “outside of therapy.” In addition this all cannot help but leave one wondering whether the scientist-practitioner model has not in fact gotten the conceptual cart (i.e., emphasis on discipline-specific, empirically derived knowledge) before the praxis-based horse (i.e., skill and sensitivity in the craft of therapeutic relating). Further, engaging this question only serves to reveal an even deeper question. That is, if the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical commitments of the mainstream of the discipline are to be taken seriously, as would seem to be the hope baked into the curricula of clinical training programs, then it would seem necessary to admit that because of the laws and principles that the discipline takes to be governing all aspects of our lives and relationships, there will always be so much causal inertia at play in any human life that therapeutic intervention is really always marginal, and, thus can be mostly just palliative in nature. Therapy can only operate at the margins of human life and experience where, for whatever reason, cracks in the deterministic flow of life may have formed, where unexpected, or as-yet unidentified lawful relations, are operating but are not yet fully understood, or where “error variance” (the psychological equivalence of random mutation in the biological world) is found to occur. In the end, we are forced to ask ourselves just what therapy might actually be able to accomplish that would be of any genuinely meaningful or transformative consequence operating way out on those extreme phenomenal fringes of life while the whole of our humanity (according to the scholarly discipline and the philosophical commitments on which it rests) is the necessary result of all sorts of causal forces.

It is important to note here, however, that the central issue in all of this is actually *not* whether clinical practice should be informed by the larger knowledge base of the discipline. Rather, the central issue concerns the nature of that knowledge base and the relevance it might have for clinical practice. In other words, the central issue is the underlying ontological, epistemological, and moral assumptions and assertions the mainstream of the discipline makes

regarding the nature of human nature itself, and, thus, the ontological being of the persons who turn to counselors for help in understanding themselves and others. This issue is, we firmly believe, the one that should be of utmost concern both to individual practitioners and to the discipline as a whole.

The current knowledge base and general theoretical outlook championed in the psychotherapeutic disciplines, when taken seriously, forces clinicians into the untenable position we have described above because it inserts into clinical practice mechanistic, naturalistic, and deterministic assumptions about the nature of clients, their relationships, and their problems. The effects of inserting such assumptions into therapy are actually fairly easy to specify. They include regarding one’s clients, and human beings in general, as fundamentally non-agentic natural organisms whose lives and struggles are principally the product of determinative physical and environmental conditions, which, as such, possess no intrinsic meaning or purpose. Granted, it might be argued that human beings are a very complex sort of organism, one whose actions and motivations are in many ways far too complex, most of the time, to allow for the sort of exhaustive causal explanation or prediction that naturalistic psychology aims to achieve. Such a response reflects an attempt to preserve some sense of meaning or freedom in human life by appealing to the frequent unpredictability of behavior resulting from ignorance of the operative causes in any and every instance. Unfortunately, the tactic fails because it offers to balance the epistemological limits that naturalistic accounts of human action face by retreating to the vagaries of randomness and “error variance” in order to preserve some small space for agency. Conceiving of human agency as indeterminism is, however, just as conceptually indefensible as invoking determinism to explain it away (see, Williams 2005, 2017). Nonetheless, even were there to be identifiable cases where exhaustive explanation and prediction of human behavior were possible, the understanding of such cases would really only reflect an understanding of the operations of impersonal, dull, meaningless material or mechanical stuff, and not the “stuff” of actual human experience or concern.

In contrast, if the discipline-specific knowledge that was available to students and practitioners reflected extended and sophisticated study of the core issues of

our humanity – that is, for example, what it means to be a human being, the nature of the good and flourishing life, the meaning of suffering, the moral purpose of life itself, and the nature of genuine human agency – then it would be possible to make a convincing case that such discipline-specific knowledge is in fact crucial to effective and meaningful therapy. Not only would such a knowledge base be deeper and more engaging at moral and existential levels, it could not help but be more insightful and more faithful to genuinely human phenomena than the existing scientific orthodoxies the discipline currently privileges (Gantt & Williams, 2018). And, as we will argue later in this paper, this possibility is especially important if our therapeutic training and practice is to reflect in any legitimate way Christian and Latter-day Saint understandings and commitments – especially, and for all the same reasons, when the clients themselves are Christians and Latter-day Saints, and want to experience life, self, and healing as such.

POSTMODERNISM AND CRITICAL THEORY

One final observation remains to be made regarding the current state of discipline-specific psychological knowledge. As the second decade of the 21st century comes to close, it is increasingly apparent that, for the most part, psychology has managed to “sit out” many of the substantive cultural conflicts that have roiled the Western intellectual tradition since at least the inter-war period of the 20th century. Except among certain small groups and organizations at the periphery of the discipline, postmodern movements such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, deconstructionism and social constructionism have remained safely at the fringes of the discipline. One often searches in vain to find among the most widely used texts in the discipline even a cursory examination of these postmodern traditions, and the larger political, scientific, and cultural debates their analyses have stimulated. Their authors seem to simply review (often poorly) the assumptions, methods, and findings of positivistic social science (O’Donohue & Willis, 2018). Perhaps the greatest inroads have been made, though only fairly recently, in the form of various neo-Hegelian and neo-Marxist movements such

as second-wave feminism, critical psychology, Critical Theory generally, and various other structural or post-structural “-isms” (Parker, 2015). Second-wave feminism, in particular, has found its way into therapeutic practice in the form of various feminist-therapy perspectives (see, e.g., Evans, Kincade, & Seem, 2011).

Mainstream psychology’s tradition of self-insulation from postmodern intellectual life seems, however, ultimately to be doomed. Various species of Critical Theory (Bronner, 2017), having incubated for decades in places such as the Frankfurt School, and establishing root and flower in the humanities, are now poised to have a major impact in psychology, particularly in the clinical areas. After Second-wave Feminism, Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), followed closely by Queer Theory and Gender Theory (Wilchins, 2014), is perhaps the most active and influential of the new “critical theory” movements, and one that appears likely to have the most far-reaching impact. It is becoming increasingly clear that these various critical theory approaches are beginning to exert significant influence on both the knowledge base and the actual practice of psychotherapy (see, e.g., Loewenthal, 2015; Paquin, Tao, & Budge, 2019). While this particular essay is not the place to examine this movement in detail, we can make one important observation.

This entire family of theories has its roots in postmodern, neo-Hegelian and neo-Marxist or cultural Marxist traditions (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). Thus, central to all “critical theories” is: (1) a commitment to epistemological and moral relativism, in the form of a “radical skepticism as to the possibility of objective truth and knowledge,” (2) an “obsession with language” and its power to construct reality, (3) an insistence that “no one set of cultural norms can be said to be better than any other,” and, finally, (4) the assertion that “the individual, like everything else, is a product of powerful discourses and culturally constructed knowledge” (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020, pp. 39-42). In this way, postmodern critical theory “largely rejects both the smallest unit of society – the individual – and the largest – humanity – and instead focuses on small, local groups as the producers of [purely contingent] knowledge” (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020, p. 42; clarifying comment added). However, despite

a common rejection of positivistic models of scientific inquiry (i.e., Western science), and the various therapeutic approaches founded on such inquiry, there is nonetheless an important sense in which these new and increasingly influential critical perspectives can be reconciled with more traditional, modernist forms of psychological theory and practice. This happens as we realize that regardless of their clear differences, both positivist psychology (in its commitment to reductive naturalism) and postmodern critical theory (in its commitment to epistemological, cultural, and moral relativism) are united by their utter rejection of meaningful human agency. That is to say, at their very conceptual core, both views are committed to a view of human beings as inherently and inescapably the products of powerful, fundamentally impersonal, global/cosmic forces against which they themselves, in their personhood, are effectively powerless. Additionally, not only do these rival perspectives reduce human thought, feeling, and action to being the merely contingent outcome of powerful causal forces, they also assert that these forces operate almost exclusively outside individual conscious awareness, control, or participation; thereby, further depriving persons of the possibility of playing any substantive role in the creation of their own lives.

THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

It is certainly the case that not many of the topics and questions that engage scholars and intellectuals find their way into the thought and discourse and everyday life of the broader population, from which almost all counseling client populations come. However, the issue of agency in its relation to determinism is one issue in particular that makes contact with everyday experience, appearing in even fleeting questions about why we do certain things, feel certain ways, or think the way we do. The question of agency and determinism is at the very core of our moral lives – our sense of right and wrong. It is the question of whether we have real choices in what we do and whether we ought to feel guilty for the things we do. It touches, thus, our sense of the importance of the past and its power and influence over us. It touches our sense of the future and the possibility of

hope and transformation. It affects all of our interpersonal experiences; for example, as we wonder whether other people can be trusted, whether the future of any relationship lies in the hands of the people involved, or whether our relationships are ultimately prey to things outside our control.

In one form or another the question of determinism is deeply, even inescapably, imbedded in our humanity. How we answer the question cannot help but profoundly impact how we understand ourselves and others. And, to take this discussion to the direction of the purposes of this essay, the question of determinism is at the heart of our Christian faith – indeed, of any Christian conception of life and meaning. In a closed universe where hard determinism holds true – the kind of universe that the mainstream theories and schools of contemporary psychology endorse and the kind of universe that informs cultural theories of all stripes – the concepts of responsibility, sin, forgiveness, and atonement are mere fictions, concepts without genuine content or meaning, label for one family within the inevitable givens life. In such a world, therapy becomes merely one formalized approach among others for providing comfort and support to those who suffer in particular ways, a technical means by which various “coping strategies” or “behavioral management” regimes are taught and implemented to mitigate to some degree the inevitable misfortunes and unpleasantness of living. Sadly, in such a world, nothing can truly change or be otherwise than it is, as everything that is, everything that occurs, is as it must causally be. We move next to a discussion of how and why this is the case and how that impacts the meaning of life, which meaning must surely be at the core of anything that motivates people to seek therapy, and any therapy that intends to respond.

THE FUNDAMENTAL VULNERABILITY OF MEANING AND MEANINGFUL ACTION

In the 21st Century, taking seriously the hard determinism that contemporary psychology offers entails accepting at least two conclusions, one or both of which must necessarily be true for all of us:

1. Our psychological lives, actions, moral sensibilities, and social relationships (the very stuff of

a Christian life) are necessarily determined by the physical mechanisms of our bodies, including genes, neurotransmitters, hormones, and the functions of the meat and chemical of the nervous system (and all other bodily functions connected to that system).

2. Our psychological lives, actions, moral sensibilities, and social relationships (the very stuff of a Christian life) are essentially determined by any number of invisible, ubiquitous, and causally powerful abstractions (i.e., constructs, variables, structures, systems, etc.) presumed to constitute the underlying reality of our psychological and social worlds, but whose operations are for the most part opaque and whose influences can only be overcome (and only in some cases) by enhanced awareness or re-education.

The first of these conclusions is the one we find most often in contemporary cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary psychological approaches – even if they are not always explicit in admitting as much.³ The second conclusion is one more articulated in social constructionist, postmodern, structuralist, systems theories, and critical race and gender theories, perspectives that assume that only those persons who have been specially trained, or whose consciousness has been sufficiently awakened and attuned, can detect the existence and operations of the relevant powerful abstractions and their effects in the world and in the lives of people.

Given the reductive and deterministic nature of each of these two consequences, it is only reasonable to conclude that if either or both are in fact the case, then human beings are not in fact moral agents operating meaningful and purposefully in the world of genuine

3. Oddly, approaches endorsing this sort of sweeping claim about the biological basis of human behavior and thought do so despite the fact that our knowledge base lacks even a single instance of any particular, meaningful, purpose human behavior having ever been created or produced by any physical or chemical state. Indeed, the examples typically used to bolster the expansive deterministic claims of contemporary neuroscience and evolutionary psychology are not examples of the causal production of meaningful, intentional psychological phenomena at all. They are, rather, examples of deficits, constraints, and limitations, or generalized, gross, non-historical and non-purposeful events that never ascend to the level of the genuinely psychologically meaningful in the first place (for more extensive analyses of these important, though often overlooked, issues, see, e.g., Bennett & Hacker, 2003; Canter & Turner, 2014; Gantt, 2002; Tallis, 2011; Uttal, 2001; Williams, 2001; Wiseman, 2016).

possibilities. Rather, we are merely the mechanically ordained products of powerful external forces – whether biochemical and physical or structural and systemic – that dictate our every thought, feeling, and behavior, and do so with little if any real awareness or active participation on our part in the process. Ontologically speaking, then, human beings are relegated to being fundamentally passive objects – or, in the words of the prophet Lehi in the Book of Mormon, “things to be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:14) – pressed upon continuously by any number of impersonal, non-rational, mechanical or structural forces. If, however, we are not moral agents – if we are not the sorts of beings whose nature it is to initiate and carry through morally meaningful actions – then it becomes difficult to see what possible need there could be for a Savior, or what meaning or purpose an atonement could ever serve? In the absence of any real agentic capacity to direct our lives in purposive and genuinely meaningful ways that are morally sensitive and responsive to others, it is hard to imagine that any behavior could be judged worthy of either praise or blame, blessing or condemnation. What possible hope for redemption could “things acted upon” ever need or even have? In a world such as that envisioned in each of the above consequences, the gospel of Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice can only operate around the margins of our lives, at the most perhaps affording some sort of subjective comfort or a handy coping strategy to those who happen to believe – a sort of spiritual opium or Christian crutch for those who might need such things – very much in keeping with Karl Marx’s classical assessment of religion.

THE FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF REAL CHANGE FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

It hardly needs saying that the real possibility of genuinely meaningful change in the lives and the very being of human beings lies at the very heart of any Christian perspective on psychology, particularly in those areas related to counseling or psychotherapy (Gantt, Wages, & Thayne, 2015; Jones & Butman, 2011; Knabb, Johnson, Bates, & Sisemore, 2019; Neff & McMinn, 2020). Central to all Christian understanding is the doctrine that we, being born into a fallen, mortal world. We are all broken and in need of

redemption and the transformative healing it brings. Unfortunately however, if we are all broken, morally and spiritually, but are, in addition, inevitably born into a set of conditions where virtually all of our actions and meanings are simply dictated by accidents of biology and environment, then there can be little hope for genuine healing or transformation. In the prevailing metaphysics of virtually all contemporary psychology both our fallen brokenness and our chance for healing are controlled and dictated by virtually the same set of circumstances – so we can only hope that various aspects of our causal endowment can really contradict each other to our benefit. A risky proposition at best. In other words, any change in behavior that might occur would simply be the necessitated result of whatever the joint actions of biology and the natural laws and structures of the universe might happen to produce (by chance) for and in us. If our psychological lives, and even consciousness itself, are nothing more than the determinative products of those sorts of impersonal causal realities, then whatever our responses to our circumstances, our relationships, and even our future possibilities might be, they are likewise simply things brought about by other things, none of which we control. Indeed, any control we might think we have in our own behavior, thoughts, and aspirations is itself a product of those self-same causal realities and thus illusory (see, Caruso, 2013 on the illusion of agency and moral responsibility).

Nonetheless, some have argued that so long as we can live within the illusion of freedom, we might also be able to maintain the illusion of meaning (see, e.g., Dennett, 2004; Harris, 2012). In short, given that what happens to us is experienced in gross pleasant/unpleasant terms, and that this meaningful us (in the conversational sense of “we care about those things”), then our lives can be meaningful on some elementary level, and an elementary hope for meaningfulness, mattering, and perhaps even “salvation,” might be maintained (however ironically). Unfortunately, even if all this adventure in sustaining the illusion of freedom were to work in the attempt to maintain meaning in a fundamentally deterministic and meaningless world, even if we were all to agree that we are going to save meaning in our lives by deceiving ourselves about what we really know to be true about ourselves, such a strategy cannot work for morality, unless morality too

is similarly distorted or redefined. Without genuine human agency morality can have no meaning above the level of whatever we happen to designate (for ourselves) as pleasant or unpleasant. In such a scheme, the “good” is whatever happens to produce and become associated with pleasant feelings, or that which happens to be personally preferred. Likewise, the “bad” is whatever happens to produce and become associated with unpleasant feelings, or whatever we happen not to prefer. In this way, morality, like agency and meaning before it, is reduced to simply a “useful fiction” (Joyce, 2016, p. 219).

Of course, the problems run even deeper than agency and meaning being illusory, and our moral sensibilities nothing more than fictions, because even our evaluations of the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the state of affairs each of us is presented with in life is itself determined for us and are, thus, in no way deeply or meaningfully our own. In a completely determined world the things we experience as most profoundly and significantly relevant to making sense of who we are and we ought to be, the things that appear to matter at the most fundamental levels, are in fact things without real substance or import. In the end, a world of this sort is not one that is compatible with the central claims and promises of the Christian worldview as revealed both in scripture and in the living person of the Savior, Jesus Christ.

It is incumbent upon us as Christians to try to make sense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in general and the Atonement of Jesus Christ in particular. In the deterministic world of reductive naturalism that contemporary psychological theories and models presupposes, however, the Gospel of Christ is simply impossible to defend or explain in any comprehensive way because its foundational claims and premises are dismissed at the outset. Commandments such as “love one another” or “seek ye first the kingdom of God” might sound good, but whether they will be lived-out in any individual case depends entirely on the biological, environmental, and socio-structural factors that happen to be operating on the individual so as to produce obedient or disobedient behaviors. Stronger commandments, such as “thou shalt not kill,” can perhaps be defended as important in strictly utilitarian terms (as in various social contract theories), having usefulness in regard to both social and personal survival, but in

the end, on the deterministic account, people will do that they are determined to do. Perhaps such injunctions (e.g., “thou shalt not kill”) might help to modify behavior around the margins, but whatever power they may have in human affairs, or whatever power of self-reflection they might help to generate, can only be based on the constructive and rhetorical power of language to create ideas in us (see, e.g., Gergen, 2009). Such rhetorical power, however, either has within itself the capacity to propel us to choices and actions – in which case our behaviors are no more meaningful than those produced by biological and environmental factors – or, the capacity to create rhetoric and act upon its meanings must be, according to the extant theories of the discipline themselves, causally determined. In other words, any attempt to explain the work of human agency without allowing for genuine human agency is doomed to fail and become, in the end, merely empty rhetoric.

For Christians, there is a much more serious matter to be dealt with in relation to all of this. It is simply that if we live in a causally necessitated world without meaningful agency and moral responsibility, then commandments relating to moral action are grossly unfair and unjust, perhaps even cruel – or they are merely non-sense. Any punishments or rewards connected to human behavior must be seen to be fundamentally arbitrary and, therefore, very hard to render sensible or justifiable. Granted, one might accept this view and join the ranks of those existentialists and cynics who have already noticed the problem and opted to embrace absurdity (Daigle, 2006). But, barring such a retreat into irrationality, one must explain why, if the moral requirements and recompense of the Christian theology of divine commandments are real, then how, in a deterministic world, they could ever be just. And, if they are not real, then how and why have they gained and maintained the influence they have when moral scrupulosity is a Promethean task at best. The deep Christian question here is this: If we are all broken but not really fixable, if there is no responsibility for the good or evil in our lives because there is no real agency in our beings, and if any moral judgment must be arbitrary and meaningless, then what possible meaning can there be in the Atonement of Jesus Christ? Indeed, why should we even care about such things? One might argue here that we have simply

overstated the case for hard determinism, and that the discipline does not really hold to such strict views of causation. While we have tried to build a conceptual case for the fact that virtually all theories and models in psychology really are deterministic in the hard sense we describe here, the best evidence for our case is the near complete absence on truly agentic perspectives, theories, models, and practices within the literature and training within the discipline. Even the “softer,” so called CBT family of models lacks a literature of agency itself as well as a philosophical grounding that foregrounds real human agency and anchors it intellectually or practically.

ATONEMENT AS THE MODEL OF CHANGE

We have argued that one or another species of hard determinism is woven into the intellectual fabric, and often the practice, of contemporary psychological models of human being and human behavior. We will now argue that genuine human agency is woven into spiritual as well as intellectual understandings of Christianity. The hope of every Christian is that his or her brokenness can ultimately be healed through the atoning sacrifice and redemptive power of the love of Jesus Christ. The need for atonement in the life of every Christian comes about because Christians know that human beings are in fact incomplete and capable of sinning, broken and in need of being remade, and that real healing and transformation comes only in and through the atonement of Jesus Christ (Crisp, 2020). Granted, one could deploy Christian rhetoric to speak of an atonement through Jesus Christ that could rearrange our physiology so that whatever actions, desires, or thought our brains were producing could be stopped or changed so that our bodies could then start producing actions, desires, and thoughts more in line with the ones God desires us to have (see, e.g., Stanford, 2010 for an account of the “biology of sin” from just such a perspective). However, this line of reasoning raises important questions as to why God would engineer us with built-in morally relevant flaws in the first place, or put us in a position where such problems were physically and environmentally inevitable.⁴ If we reject the doctrine of predestination, then the answer

4. Another forum would be necessary to provide a sufficient analysis of non-morally relevant physical problems.

must be that He wouldn't do such a thing; for, there is no purpose in doing so. It would be like an engineer building a flawed and unstable bridge on purpose, just so she or he could watch it crumble and build it over again – correctly this time. And, we know from LDS scripture that His purpose, His “work” and His “glory” is to “bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).

A similar question we might pose is why would God put us in our particular socio-historical-cultural contexts, governed as they are by abstract, unconscious structures and systems of thought, the essence of which is to cause us to carry out all the harm and immorality we visit on each other, only later on (after death) to make all the adjustments necessary to repair those predeterminate exigencies. This “repair shop” model of Christianity, particularly the atonement of Christ, simply does not work for serious Christians who understand the centrality of moral agency to God's plan for our lives and happiness (Crisp, 2020; Givens & Barlow, 2015; Ostler, 2006). Indeed, such an approach would seem to nullify the purpose for having mortal experiences and the opportunity to choose between good and evil in the first place. At very least, it makes it difficult to make sense of God's promise to the prophet Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail that “all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D & C 122:7). Determined organisms cannot learn from experience. Certainly, a model of atonement as simply reparative does not rise to the scriptural accounts we have of the atoning event (see, e.g., Matthew 26 and D&C 19).

A MORE MEANINGFUL UNDERSTANDING OF THERAPY IN LIGHT OF THE ATONEMENT OF JESUS CHRIST

In every Christian tradition there are adherents who take little comfort in the Christian message as it is filtered through the assumptions and theories, especially psychological theories, of our larger (secular) culture (Gantt, Christensen, & Tubbs, this issue). There are many who can appreciate the good intentions and ethical aims of the Christian message, but who cannot understand how to navigate a world in which they are to be held accountable for moral acts over which they really have no control. Just eliminating the Christian message from psychological theory and practice,

because contemporary psychology trivializes or eliminates from our nature, human agency and the possibility of genuine change, not only does no good Christian service to Christian students and clients, but it also only seems to exacerbate the problem with which so many already struggle – the problem of finding meaning, purpose, and hope in their lives.

Some might argue that the Christian message of human agency is more likely to produce or worsen psychological problems than it is to ameliorate them because the freedom of agency brings with it the possibility of moral responsibility and, therefore, may serve to intensify felt guilt. For far too long, however, we believe Christian psychologists and psychotherapists have downplayed agency in the interest of eliminating guilt, and in so doing actually eliminated the possibility of genuine relief and healing because, for moral agents who understand that they are agents in the strong sense, things (even things at the core of one's self) never have to be as they presently are. In other words, no matter how dark and heavy the pall of guilt and responsibility, the atonement of Jesus Christ promises that all can be made light and lighter. But, one might ask, why is this sometimes not the message people seem to get from the study and practice of their Christianity? We will conclude this essay by responding to just that question with five observations about Christianity and agency as therapeutic, that we think have genuine potential for therapeutic effect.

Observation 1: Christianity may be the only religious/cultural movement with the necessary combination of intellectual tradition, reasoned argument, established historical record of positive cultural influence and motivation to stand against the current secular *zeitgeist* and challenge the scientific paradigm that locks human beings into a hard determinist world that offers no real hope for their development as moral agents (Moreland, 2018; Williams & Gantt, 2013). Indeed, every Christian should be uneasy with the prevailing intellectual tide of the discipline (Cummings, O'Donohue, & Cummings, 2009). Stated succinctly, the central reason Christians must reject the scientific paradigm is rooted in the realization that (1) if the human moral world really is as the mainstream of the discipline takes it to be and hard determinism does prevail in human affairs as it does in non-human affairs, rendering human agency an illusion, and (2)

there is a creator God, then that god should not be expected to atone for the sins of the world but rather to apologize for them – since He is the one ultimately responsible for the causally determined mess that has been human history. Christians cannot accept the reality of a loving, caring God whose every intention is to redeem and save His children and NOT reject outright, and actively seek to counter, the rising influence of scientism. For Christians, the atonement of Jesus Christ is real, and, thus, human fate is open-ended, human life is intrinsically meaningful, and human action is inescapably moral, i.e., it matters.

The clinical relevance of this observation should be obvious, but perhaps bears repeating. It is that most things in the world do *not* need to be as they are. Most things did not necessarily have to happen as they did. Certainly nearly all human events, including our personal psychological, emotional, and behavioral lives did not have to come about as they did, and do not now need to be what they are. They came through complex understandings, feelings, doings, identities, and desirings. And, thus, they can be undone in the same way. This does not imply that such change can be easily or casually done merely by some extraordinary act of will. On the contrary, often the road out of any particular being-in-the-world, will be as complex as was the road into it. But it can be done because our mental, psychological and moral being is at all times something we are doing and *not* something we just are. And all things that are done can be undone, done over, or abandoned. The ultimate therapeutic implication of all of this is that, stated in terms familiar in the Christian LDS tradition, nothing in the universe change a person from the kind of being created to act into the kind of being created just to be acted upon. There is always a real and a truer possibility within our reach, and within our being-in-the-world.

Observation 2: We often (mis)read and (mis)interpret the scriptural and prophetic teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of two subtle influences that, we believe, ultimately serve to limit access to the gospel's fundamental healing power. The first of these influences⁵ comes from our broader culture, which inherited it from years and centuries of what is known as the Judeo-Christian tradition. This first

influence comes from common readings of the Old Testament, with a little bit of Newtonian science (or, perhaps more accurately, Newtonian metaphysics) mixed in. It is completely non-controversial to observe that Judaism has given great emphasis to what is commonly referred to as “the Law.” Indeed, the Hebrew word *Torah*, typically taken to mean the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, literally means “the Law” (Patrick, 1985). According to the common available scriptures, the “Law” is what God selected to be his fundamental means of communicating with and managing his creations, including His children. On this understanding, God works with us first (and chiefly) through the intermediary of His Law. Examples, or parts of that “Law,” include what is referred to as the Law of Moses (Patrick, 1985), as well as the many laws governing proper worship, prayer, dietary observance, and sacrifice that are specified, for example, in the book of Leviticus. Ordinances and required practices were based on revealed laws and careful observance ensured conformity to the law. Sometimes, God's response to ignoring or breaking of His Law was swift and sure. Other times God's patience stretched over decades or centuries as His people brought hardships upon themselves through disobedience. Blessings and protection were understood to be contingent upon obedience to laws. Final, the narrative suggests, the people of ancient Israel were taken captive and scattered finally because they had broken the Law given to them by God.

It is worth pointing out that much of the trouble that the Savior encountered during his earthly ministry was related to the fact that he seemed not to be sufficiently devoted to observing the many, and highly rigid and specific, requirements of the Law that dominated Jewish culture at the time. Ultimately, it was the Savior's frequent contravention of the Law that His enemies used as justification for his crucifixion. It is important to point out that ancient conception of “Law” seems not to be obviously present in the Christian faith that was forming and being articulated in the writings of the New Testament. Paul especially seems concerned that his fellow Christians understand the issues at play and the dangers of misunderstanding the nature and role of law in contrast to the clear centerpiece of Christian faith – i.e., divine grace (Wright, 2018). However, since those early days, Christianity

5. We shall discuss the second of these influences in Observation 3 below.

has managed to make peace with the Judaic (or, perhaps more accurately, Judeo-Hellenistic) concept of Law (see, Wilson, 1989). Unfortunately, it is this aspect of Christianity, this commitment to the concepts and languages of what may be referred to as “biblical legalism” (Ferguson, 2016) that seems to cause real difficulties for the faith life of some people in our day. It seems safe to say that for some people today, this legalistic conception of God, gospel, and faith is as likely to create guilt and dis-ease as it is to comfort some who is struggling emotionally and psychologically. For these people their Christian faith, unfortunately can be as likely to be seen as a burden as a boon – as part of the problem more than part of the solution.

At least two things can be identified as contributing to the continuing emphasis on laws and lawfulness (i.e., legalism) in contemporary Christianity. One is the emergence of the approach to theology, and thus to faith, known as *sola scriptura*, an approach that has been very influential in the Protestant movements (Barrett, 2016). This idea is essentially that we, as Christians, should confine our faith and practices to what can be established by direct reading of the Biblical text alone. This process of supporting doctrine, often by “proof texting” from written sources clearly has its strengths and purposes. However, it also has significant problems. For example, it can sometimes devolve into using isolated, out-of-context quotations to establish a doctrinal proposition without sufficient care to avoid introducing one’s own presuppositions and biases due to a lack of sufficient attention to context, translation and etymological histories, alternative readings, or authoritative clarifications. It is important, at least for purposes of this essay, to note that this “hard” reading of scripture, is quite similar to the way decisions are reached based on the reading of written Law in Old Testament, Hebraic traditions (Patrick, 1985).

One other historical factor has contributed to our current tendency to find elements of the old familiar understandings of law and lawfulness in our contemporary understanding of our Christian faith. We submit that this influence comes largely from our intellectual tradition of Newtonianism (Feingold, 2005). Sir Isaac Newton was undoubtedly the most influential early figure in the establishment of our modern

physical sciences. He formulated laws that allowed for prediction, causal explanation, and, to a significant extent, control of the physical world. The subsequent tradition of “Newtonian” thought became a larger and wider worldview – an approach that enshrined lawfulness as the key aspect that rendered the known world controllable and predictable (see, e.g., Cohen, 1985; Gantt & Williams, 2014, McMullin, 1978). It is not surprising that the religious world, particularly, certain popular strands of theological reasoning, would find it attractive, even necessary, to integrate Newtonian conceptions of the lawful universe into theology and our understanding of the divine (Force & Popkin, 1999). From this perspective, it made sense to conceive of God himself as the greatest of the Newtonian scientists. It seemed reasonable to assume that Newton’s laws were in fact God’s laws, and thus emphasis on and confidence in cosmic lawfulness found its way into religious doctrine, including our thinking about God and the manner of his interactions with us, as well as about the conditions and requirements of salvation (Oakley, 1961). It was easy even to make grace itself conditional upon universal (i.e., Divine and Natural) law.

The Christian world kept alive the tradition of relating the lawfulness of the physical universe, and events within it, to the human moral realm and human moral events. For some this comparison has been a loose, metaphorical one, for others, the comparison is much tighter, and sometimes quite literal. This emphasis on the gospel of Jesus Christ as first and foremost lawful has had, we suggest, at least two principal effects (and a vast number of particular manifestations in the lives of people, including Latter-day Saints). Unfortunately, neither of these effects has been particularly helpful for people struggling with religious issues, moral issues, or issues of emotional and psychological well-being. Indeed, these effects of the tradition of “lawfulness” we have described here have affected our understanding of, and faith in, the atonement of Jesus Christ itself, and our confidence that it can have any salutary effects on us – principally because the whole process is seen as first and foremost lawful, externally determined, and cosmic in proportion. Simply put, to one struggling with emotional, moral, or psychologically relevant issues, it may seem like “God is a nice enough person, but he can’t really help me because I’m

not keeping all the laws, and He can only come and help me if the law between us is satisfied and in place.”

This is all to be expected, of course, when people come to see themselves as having no real agency (having accepted the prevailing social science view of themselves). People with no genuine moral agency would be expected to consider themselves as powerless in their moral/religious lives as they are in their psychological/emotional lives, as having no say in how God’s judgment will turn out for them, and, thus, no influence on their own eternal fate. The laws (both theological/divine and psychological/scientific) are, after all, in control. And, even for those who do take themselves to have freedom of the will, to be in control of their own lives, the weight and number of moral laws, in addition to all their other responsibilities in life, quickly becomes overwhelming. Indeed, scripture is replete with examples of people condemned for failing to adequately keep the laws of God. Contrasting examples of success in keeping those laws, however, seem fewer in number. Thus, as we contemplate this state of affairs regarding the state of our souls, we are never, it seems, assured of God’s approval. First, because we may not understand all the laws, or any of them in their fullness, and second, because we are expected not only to keep them, but to keep them sincerely, happily, and to love the Lawgiver all at the same time. Doing all of this can seem a considerable psychological challenge.

Finally, we should mention here the effect of this emphasis on laws and lawfulness on our understanding the nature and meaning of the Atonement. If God’s chief mode of interacting with us is through law, and if the moral as well as the physical world is governed by law or laws, which God Himself must likewise obey, then the act of Jesus’s atoning sacrifice takes on (or can take on) more an air of cosmic necessity than of personal love and compassion. Whether it can apply to oneself, personally, becomes a matter of immense lawful complexity, replete with infinite nuances that are beyond anyone’s cognitive capacity to understand or control. In this way it becomes difficult for many to find comfort in an atonement that reflects cosmic lawful necessity rather than voluntary love and sacrifice. When this line of thinking is at the core of our Christian understanding, the atonement is not able to reach us and help us change – law is in the way and it

is impassive. It is thus from a therapeutic point of view, irrelevant.

Observation 3: The second influence on how we (mis)read and (mis)understand the gospel of Jesus Christ has to do with the role particular doctrines and tenets are taken to play. We mentioned above the influence of the theological principle of *sola scriptura* in the Christian world, particularly in various Protestant denominations. The commitment to an exclusive reliance on the authority of written scripture has had a profound effect in the Christian world (Barrett, 2016). One notable effect is the importance that has been placed on the traditional Christian creeds and their use in the attempt to rationalize the nature of God, among other issues (Olson, 1999). The attempt to thematize religion and provide a formal account of God that is consistent with established rational principles and categories of thought is the foundation of systematic theology. Systematic theology aims, among other things, to rationalize and, thus, “cognitivize” our understandings of, and conversations about, God, the Gospel, scripture, and even the Atonement.

While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has largely avoided the project of centralized or official systematic theology, we have not been immune from the tendency over the last two centuries to rationalize and intellectualize, as we have attempted to articulate our beliefs and teachings about God and His Gospel. For too many members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – often more or less unaware of the larger Christian, especially Protestant, context of the project of systematic theology – faith is often conceptualized as an essentially cognitive, intellectual issue, and personal worthiness is frequently seen as strongly connected to strength of belief in particular doctrinal propositions, tenets, or beliefs. As a people, we tend (albeit informally) to bring up what are essentially questions and concerns of systematic theology and give them considerable importance in our faith lives. An effect of this “systematic theologizing” approach to understanding our religion and religious lives is that we pose questions to ourselves that have their origins in, and take their form from, the propositional or creedal approach native to other forms of Christianity.

This issue bears directly on the topic at hand; in that, bringing such an approach to making sense of

scriptural and prophetic teachings, as well as the Atonement of Christ, tends to foreground belief in the “truth” of abstract doctrines, or even practices and particular articulations of basic principles, as foundational to our faith and essential both to our spiritual identity and our moral character (Thayne & Gantt, 2019), as well as our perceived worthiness and thus whether we merit, i.e., deserve, atonement and forgiveness. For example, because we know that we should believe in Jesus Christ, we might worry about how clearly and strongly we might believe that he literally raised Lazarus, cursed a fig tree, or walked on water. And, if perchance our confidence falters, we might then count our faltering cognitive commitment as fundamentally a moral failure. Or, we might question how important it is that baptisms be by immersion, and what the rational grounds are for any belief, and where faith or belief get their authority over our minds and reason. Unfortunately, it is only in light of the subtle, tacit influence of rationalizing or “cognitizing” belief, and the taking of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be a series of religious propositions (playing essentially the same role that logical propositions play in formal logic) that we read the gospel propositionally – that is, as a series or collage of propositional statements about God, good, and us.

Sadly, in the end, making all of this cognitive stuff work can seem unduly difficult and largely unfulfilling. Once that feeling sets in, it is easy to begin thinking that the Gospel itself is what is failing us. Even worse, some come to feel that it is they who have in fact failed the Gospel – that they have personally failed Jesus because they just cannot seem to put the Gospel all together in a rationally sensible way that gets all the pieces to fit together as they should. In the modern cultural and religious climate – infringed upon by the power to logic and the rationalizing and cognitizing of nearly everything – it is easy to see our rational failure as a moral failure. Thus, either we have failed or the gospel has failed us, intellectually. Whatever the case, the Gospel ceases to be a viable source of healing or help and seems more like a burden, complicating everything else in our psychological and emotive life that we may be dealing with. Thus understood, it does not reveal God to us. The pull to understand the Atonement of Jesus Christ in this hyper-cognitive way is almost as irresistible as it is

debilitating and dispiriting. Within this intellectual regime, the Atonement of Christ simply becomes a proposition of exhaustingly cosmic proportions, an equation with too many unknowns and unknowables. In this form, it is not readily apparent just how the Gospel of Christ can actually help to heal, center, and bestow hope. It may seem more like a burden one needs to put down in order to work on other, perhaps more soluble relational, emotional, or moral problems.

Observation 4: It is possible to read and understand the gospel of Jesus Christ in a way that does not require reconciling with the specter of the angry and demanding god of the Old Testament – we need not sense that particular god is hiding behind the promises of atonement. It is possible to understand the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ without over-cognizing it, without first having to rationalize or hypothesize abstract realities in terms of principles and doctrines interposed between Christ the Savior and us (Thayne & Gantt, 2019). This reading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is made most clear, perhaps, in two sections of Latter-day Saint scripture. The *Book of Mormon*, subtitled *Another Testament of Jesus Christ*, contains an account of the resurrected Christ appearing to the descendants of a colony of Israelites on the American continent. In this ancient record we find two occasions, one at the beginning of the account of His ministry and another at the end as He is leaving, in which Jesus Himself states plainly what his mission was (and is) and thus what His gospel is in its plainest and most powerful sense. We will consult each of these declarations briefly.

The core of the first account is found in 3 Nephi 11:31-40. We note here the first three verses (31-33):

31 Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, I will declare unto you my doctrine.

32 And this is my doctrine, and it is the doctrine which the Father hath given unto me; . . . that the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent and believe in me.

33 And whoso believeth in me, and is baptized, the same shall be saved; and they are they who shall inherit the kingdom of God.

The end of Christ’s declaration, recorded in verses 39-40, assures us:

39 Verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them.

40 And whoso shall declare more or less than this, and establish it for my doctrine, the same . . . is not built upon my rock; but he buildeth upon a sandy foundation, . . .

At the end of His ministry, Jesus delivered a very similar account of the crux of his Gospel (3 Nephi 27: 13-16):

13 Behold I have given unto you my gospel, and this is the gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me.

14 And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil—

15 And for this cause have I been lifted up; therefore, according to the power of the Father I will draw all men unto me, that they may be judged according to their works.

16 And it shall come to pass, that whoso repenteth and is baptized in my name shall be filled; and if he endureth to the end, behold, him will I hold guiltless before my Father at that day when I shall stand to judge the world.

These passages are important to our analysis here for a number of reasons. First, they contain concise statements of the Gospel in the way that the Savior Himself chose to articulate it (assuming it was copied correctly into the Nephite record from which the Book of Mormon was taken). The crux of the Gospel seems to be believing *in* Christ in that most important sense of knowing and trusting in who He is and what He did (which is different from believing in a proposition or principle). The Gospel itself is thus quite simple. It is that there will always be warnings and counsel, including commandments and principles given in every age, regarding the kinds of life, actions, beliefs, and meanings that will take one to Christ and facilitate the acceptance of the Atonement he offers and there will

be particular kinds of life, actions, beliefs and meanings in every age which will be particularly likely to work against believing in him and accepting His gift. There will also be ordinances that allow us to perform public statements and affirmations of our belief in and acceptance of His atonement and our willingness to live the way He asks us of us. But, and this is perhaps the most important point, the Gospel is performative, and, thus, really quite simple. It is not cognitively complex at all, not subtle, and apparently within our agentic power to realize.

Our point here is that our Christian faith, our religion, can be salutary in every age. It facilitates life and abundance. But this healing power of the Gospel can be overlooked or even dismissed, in the lives and minds, of those who are struggling and need psychological, spiritual, and moral healing, if the central gift of love and healing is occluded by one or another of the perspectives we have described above. It's hard to see, hear, or feel the healing if the "angry God" still scares us, if we are consumed by guilt from broken laws, or if all that is left of our religious life is rational and cognitive commitment. It is also hard to see, hear, or feel healing if we do not experience ourselves as moral agents possessed of the power to act regardless of our circumstances. But if we can get past all those things, the promise of the atonement is sure and it can heal all wounds and brokenness.

Observation 5: Given the foregoing analysis, the final point to be made as we consider the meaning and power of the Atonement in providing us healing and peace is how the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ might be fruitfully understood and what role moral agency really plays in being able to be helped and healed by Him. Much of our analysis thus far has suggested that there are many aspects in our contemporary culture, and in the discipline of psychology in particular, that can exert a profound effect on how we understand ourselves (as moral agents or reactive organisms) and how we understand the Gospel (in terms of law and abstract principles or gifts and endowments). These same things will have an effect on how and whether the Atonement of Jesus Christ might be seen primarily in terms of cognitive complexity or whether it is a source of genuine hope and healing.

In the April 2017 General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, President

Russell M. Nelson spoke directly about the nature and meaning of the Atonement of Christ. What he taught has bearing on the therapeutically relevant questions we have been raising here. He stated:

It is doctrinally incomplete to speak of the Lord's atoning sacrifice by shortcut phrases, such as "the Atonement" or "the enabling power of the Atonement" or "applying the Atonement" or "being strengthened by the Atonement." These expressions present a real risk of misdirecting faith by treating the *event* as if it had living existence and capabilities independent of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

Under the Father's great eternal plan, it is the Savior who suffered. It is the Savior who broke the bands of death. It is the Savior who paid the price for our sins and transgressions and blots them out on condition of our repentance. It is the Savior who delivers us from physical and spiritual death.

There is no amorphous entity called "the Atonement" upon which we may call for succor, healing, forgiveness, or power. Jesus Christ is the source. Sacred terms such as *Atonement* and *Resurrection* describe what the Savior did, according to the Father's plan, so that we may live with hope in this life and gain eternal life in the world to come. The Savior's atoning sacrifice – the central act of all human history – is best understood and appreciated when we expressly and clearly connect it to Him. (p. 40)

This emphasis on the Atonement of Jesus Christ as something He *did*, an *action*, rather than as a powerful invisible force or principle lawfully governed and quite apart from any person, mortal or divine, is vital to understanding what *atonement* means for us and how we can participate in the work of Christ's atonement. Two additional scriptures give insight into how this all might work in the lives of morally agentic children of God. In the *Book of Mormon*, we find two very poignant expressions of the meaning and purpose of the mission of the Savior. The first is Alma 7:11-12, which reads:

11 And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

12 And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will

take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.

There are many things we might learn from this passage, but the least we should take away from it is an understanding that Christ's life on earth was not simply for "show," he did not simply provide Himself as an example. He came to know and He experienced. We suggest that while such experiences serve, perhaps, many purposes, there are two that are especially relevant to our discussion here. First, we can be assured that His mortal experience enabled Him to understand us, to know intimately and thoroughly how to succor us in our moments of particular need and in our neediness, all of which is occasioned by our own mortal experiences. Second, because of the Savior's firsthand knowledge and experience of suffering and pain (both physical and emotional), there is no person who can legitimately claim that the Savior "just doesn't understand," either in this life or the life to come.

Additionally, we also find in scripture two further accounts of the Savior's role in the coming Day of Judgment. In the *Book of Mormon*, in the seventh chapter of Moroni, verse 27, we read:

27 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, have miracles ceased because Christ hath ascended into heaven, and hath sat down on the right hand of God, *to claim of the Father his rights of mercy which he hath upon the children of men?* (emphasis added)

We learn here a central feature of the Savior's *active, living* role and function in the judgment of all of God's Children. He has earned a claim of mercy on all of us, and his ultimate purpose is to claim us as His own. This fundamental truth is expressed in even greater detail in another passage of modern scripture (*Doctrine & Covenants* 45:3-5) which teaches:

3 Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—

4 Saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified;

5 Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life.

Here we learn an additional detail concerning the nature of the Lord's participation in judgment. Note, here again, the Savior's participation consists of his claim of mercy – based on His own merits, not ours. This sacred reality grants us permission to give up the fruitless quest of trying to measure up to the requirements of the “angry God,” or the unyielding demands of abstract principles and forces, or of whatever our limited cognitive abilities and understanding suggest may be required of us to enjoy the loving redemption of our Savior. Such things (principles, laws, and requirements) are important, perhaps, in any age, in a pragmatic sense, but they are not the crux of our eternal welfare or happiness and they are not the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as restored and taught in these latter-days. And, thus, they are likely not the source of our happiness and healing here and now.

Sadly, for any number of cultural reasons, too many of us have come to spend far too much time preparing for “judgment” as our culture teaches us to understand and expect such a thing. In this tradition, judgment is always imposed *on* someone. Thus, we too easily find ourselves spending a good deal of time preparing for judgment and agonizing, sometimes, over how best to make our case to convince a disinterested or even, perhaps, hostile tribunal, weighing in our own minds the incriminating and exculpatory evidence from our lives in the hopes that we won't be found wanting and rejected. If the interpretation of scripture we offer here has merit, however, then maybe the real test we face is whether we will find ourselves in a position of desiring and being able to accept, not an imposed judgment, but rather a gift of mercy and a welcome extend to us by our atoning Savior. It is too often the case that we spend much time and effort working on and worrying about how best to prepare for a final judgment, and almost inevitably castigating ourselves over our sorry state. We are, unfortunately, not so well-practiced in preparing to receive a gift of mercy, a loving hand extended in welcome and bidding us to come and be “at-one” with Him and be even as He is . . . if that is what we have come to want.

In the end, we firmly believe, nothing could be a better source of hope than a promised hand of mercy.

Being ready to accept it, to desire *at-one-ment* is a different thing entirely than learning to identify and conform to abstract principles and impersonal universal laws or doctrinal tenets. The view of judgment and atonement we have attempted to articulate here is one in which there is real power to heal and to exalt. In this sense, the gospel of Jesus Christ is everyone's – certainly every Christian's – “safe space” (see Gantt & Thayne, 2017). It is not an appendage to “real life,” which is the life of causal necessity the discipline of psychology lays out for us. Rather, it is the real life.

However, regardless of its simplicity and its scriptural basis, the atonement of Jesus Christ ultimately comes to nothing if human beings are not, in fact and fully, moral agents. To natural organisms the promise of atonement is at best a fiction and at worst nonsense; for, natural organisms have no need of any atonement and their acts cannot in any way be judged. In contrast, a Christianity focused on the ongoing atoning ministry of Jesus Christ, the One who has worked out his “rights of mercy” that He might lay claim to us, to every moral agent, is a Christianity that has the power to lift and heal, to make whole and to exalt.

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AUTHORS' BIOS

EDWIN E. GANTT is currently Professor of Psychology at Brigham Young University and a Fellow of the Wheatley Institution. He received his doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology from Duquesne University. He is the author of over 60 scholarly articles and book chapters. His primary research interests revolve around the questions of moral agency and the relationship between religion, science, and psychology. He is co-author (with Richard N. Williams) of *Hijacking Science: Exploring the Nature and Consequences of Overreach in Psychology*, editor of the textbook series *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Psychological Issues*, and Book Review Editor of the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*. He teaches courses in the History and Philosophy of Psychology, Personality Theory, Qualitative Research Methods, Psychology of Religion, and (his favorite) LDS Perspectives on Psychology. He and his wife Anita live in Springville and have four wonderful sons, two amazing daughters-in-law, and two beautiful grandsons.

RICHARD N. WILLIAMS received his Ph.D. in Psychological Sciences from Purdue University. He is a Professor of Psychology in the Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education at Brigham Young University. He was the founding Director of the Wheatley Institution at BYU. His scholarly interests include the philosophical, conceptual, and moral foundations of psychological theories and the relationship between traditional and postmodern perspectives. Related to this family of topics, he has written *What's Behind the Research: Discovering Hidden Assumptions in the Social Sciences* (with Brent D. Slife), edited (with Edwin E. Gantt) *On Hijacking Science: Exploring the nature and consequences of overreach in Psychology and Psychology for the Other*, and edited (with Daniel N. Robinson) *Scientism: The New Orthodoxy*. He has published in various scholarly journals, most recently (with Edwin E. Gantt) "Methodological Naturalism, Saturation, and Psychology's Failure to Save the Phenomena" (*Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*), and "Truth in a Post-Truth World: Transcendence and the Essence of Meaning" (*Journal of Constructivist Psychology*). He and his wife, Camille, have 5 children and 25 grandchildren.