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A Sacred Trust

DAVID T. SEAMONS

ASSOCIATION OF LATTER-DAY SAINT COUNSELORS AND PSYCHOTHERAPISTS

OCTOBER 4, 2019

Being invited into the innermost intimate parts of a person's life is a sacred trust. As such, it is one for which we must be personally prepared. Having an understanding that those in our care are sons and daughters of Heavenly Father must ground our approach to our clinical work, constantly guiding us as we assist them through the healing process.

As a young boy, I had a fascination with why people did what they did. This curiosity led me to be an astute observer of human behavior, whether it was at school, with friends, in a store, or in any other public venue. Because of my interest in people and their behaviors, I have always leaned towards the field of psychology. My first introduction to emotional disorders came as a result of an assignment in my Abnormal Psychology class, for which I had to spend 20 hours volunteering at the Utah State Hospital. Wow! What an experience. That “wow” experience has continued to fuel my passion through graduation and to the present.

During my graduate program, I began to see a gap between my religious beliefs and what I was learning as a would-be psychologist. Unsure of how to close this gap, I asked my instructor, “How do I bridge the gap between my religious beliefs and my professional learnings?” His answer sounded simple: “You have two hats. When you go to work you wear your professional

hat, and when you go to church, you put on your church hat.” This did not feel right; it did not make sense then, and it does not make sense now. I can only wear one hat, and that hat includes both my religious values and beliefs, and my professional orientation and practice. It is with my one hat that I wish to visit with you today.

For me, coming to this conference is more than receiving a few Continuing Education Units (CEU). I come to learn how best to help Heavenly Father's children navigate through this challenging mortal experience and return safely home. As I have visited with many of you, I have become aware of the multiple gifts that you have been given as therapists: the gift of understanding, the gift of compassion, the gift of faith, and the gift of personal revelation, to name a few. Such gifts do not come from textbooks or degrees, but from Heavenly Father, who has charged us to use them to bless the lives of others—to give faith to the faithless, hope to the hopeless, and courage to

the downtrodden. This charge includes taking the opportunity, when appropriate, to remind those with whom we work who they are and whose they are. It has been my privilege over the past 40+ years as a therapist to be invited into the private lives of many of Heavenly Father's children. I have come to reverence and cherish these experiences. They have provided and continue to provide me with many priceless insights. Let me share just a few with you.

Being invited into the inner, most intimate parts of a person's life is a sacred trust, one for which I have a personal responsibility to prepare. When people come into my office, they do so at a time of great vulnerability. They are looking for a safe place—for someone who will listen to their fears and concerns, and give them direction, encouragement, and hope. Lori Gottlieb summarized it best when she said that during the therapeutic process, patients share their "secrets and fantasies, their fears, their shame and their failures, invading the spaces they normally keep private" (Gottlieb, 2016).

It has been helpful for me to know that everyone who comes to my office is a son or daughter of a Heavenly Father who wants us to be successful in our earthly experience and return safely home. As I listen to their stories, I soon realize that they are stuck and/or lost. Their world has become confusing and frightening. They are overwhelmed with emotions that cloud their judgement and their ability to apply what they know.

Longtime Sesame Street writer Emily Perl Kingsley (1987) wrote a story in the hope of providing comfort and inspiration to those with a Down syndrome child. I believe this story can also apply to others:

I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability – to try to help people who have not shared that unique experience to understand it, to imagine how it would feel. It's like this . . .

When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip – to Italy. You buy a bunch of guidebooks and make wonderful plans. The Coliseum. The Michelangelo David. The gondolas in Venice. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting.

After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several

hours later, the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says, "Welcome to Holland." "Holland?!?" you say. "What do you mean Holland?? I signed up for Italy! I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy."

But there's been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay. The important thing is they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place full of pestilence, famine and disease. It's just a different place.

So you must go out and buy new guidebooks. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you never would have met. It's just a different place. It's slower-paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around . . . and you begin to notice Holland has windmills . . . and Holland has tulips. Holland even has Rembrandts.

But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy . . . and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say, "Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned."

And the pain of that will never, ever, ever, ever go away . . . because the loss of that dream is a very, very significant loss.

But . . . if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to go to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things . . . about Holland.

This is a familiar scenario for many that I see. Their trust is that I can assist them in adapting to "Holland." Because of this sacred trust, I begin each day petitioning the Lord for guidance and inspiration as I work with His children.

I love being a clinician! I believe in people and their ability to be happy and successful. I am of little value as a therapist if I come to a session struggling physically, emotionally, or spiritually. People expect me to give my undivided attention and skills in their behalf. For me, getting a good night's rest and having most of my home life "under control" are advantageous. Joseph Smith found this to be true when, one morning, he became upset with Emma over something she had done. Later, when he tried to translate, he found

that he could not. Joseph went out into the orchard to pray and ask the Lord why he could not translate. He soon realized that he needed the presence of the Holy Ghost. He came back into the house and asked Emma for forgiveness. He was then able to continue with the translation. In addition to being a therapist, I have several other roles: individual, husband, father, grandfather, neighbor, and friend. Over the course of these past many years, I have learned not to overlook my role as a spouse and father. It is impossible for me to be totally available for spiritual guidance if I am preoccupied with unresolved personal or familial issues.

Additionally, the perspective that I am serving Heavenly Father's children is a humbling thought that motivates me to avail myself of His spirit in the work I do. I have found that spiritual guidance comes in many different ways. Perhaps the most common is the occasional prompting to ask a specific question that needs to be asked. I believe you can find out the truth of an issue simply by asking the right question(s). Another form of spiritual guidance is the power of discernment, or the ability to hear and understand what your patient is trying to communicate. Lastly, on occasion, I have had the privilege to see my patients through the eyes of the Savior. These revelatory experiences have helped me understand who they really are and who they can become. I know that spiritual promptings are not part of our training or covered in textbooks, but they have become real and essential for me in my work. I therefore constantly strive to be worthy of these spiritual interventions. Yes, I have a Ph.D. and faithfully do my CEU's every year for my profession, but I have come to understand that it is work of a lifetime to obtain my "spiritual" CEU's.

I have noticed that, oftentimes, when I am in social gatherings and it comes out that I am a therapist, a brief awkward silence ensues, followed by someone either changing the subject, or asking a litany of questions they have always wanted to ask a therapist. Therapists deal with the daily challenges of living just like everyone else. Our training has taught us theories, tools, and techniques, but whirring beneath our hard-earned expertise is the fact that we know just how hard it is to be a person. We still come to work each day as ourselves—with our own set of vulnerabilities, our own longings and insecurities, and our own

histories. Of all my credentials as a therapist, my most significant is that I am a "card-carrying member of the human race" (Gottlieb, 2016).

Everyone has demons and therapy helps us confront them. This is a very demanding profession! If you find it difficult to separate your own struggles from those who come to see you, I would suggest that you seek help and/or consider a different profession. A therapist holds up a mirror to their patients, but patients can also hold up a mirror to their therapist.

It is my hope that my message today has reminded each of us of the sacred trust we have as we work with those who enter the doors of therapy. May we be prepared and honor this trust in everything we say and do. When all is said and done, I am just a husband, father, and grandfather with a particular education. I witness this day that God lives and that Jesus Christ is His Son. Through the grace of Jesus Christ and His Atonement, we can make mistakes, stumble at times, and repent to realign ourselves with the covenant path back to our Heavenly Father. This knowledge gives me faith and hope in all I do. May this be our perspective and motivation as we labor to assist others along this same sacred path.

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AUTHOR'S BIO

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Help Thou My Unbelief: Exploring the Secular Sources of our Clients' Doubts

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Issues of faith and doubt are often at the heart of religious clients' psychological and emotional suffering. As such, they are a topic of genuine therapeutic interest. Latter-day Saint therapists have a unique responsibility to help our religious clients work through their psychological concerns, as well as help them address their religious doubts when relevant in the therapeutic setting. We argue that many of the concerns fueling client faith crises spring from taken-for-granted assumptions absorbed from our larger secular culture. Further, these assumptions are radically different from – indeed, typically antithetical to – the premises upon many of our fundamental beliefs as Latter-day Saints rest. Indeed, these unacknowledged secular assumptions are often the source of our client's religious doubts in the first place because they are in fact toxic to sustaining a vibrant and coherent faith in the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ. By helping clients more carefully and critically examine their secular assumptions, Latter-day Saint therapists can do much to help their clients overcome or avoid otherwise fatal crises of faith and, in so doing, alleviate a great deal of unnecessary suffering.

“ . . . Doubt wisely; in strange way
 To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;
 To sleep, or run wrong, is. On a huge hill,
 Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
 Reach her, about must and about must go,
 And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so.”
 (John Dunne, *Satire III*, lines 76-82)

In the October General Conference of 2013, Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf (2013) observed: “There are few members of the Church who, at one time or another, have not wrestled with serious or sensitive questions” (p. 23). Indeed, as Karen Swallow Prior (2018) noted in her recent book, “scrutiny can be evidence of a living

faith – one that is active, growing, and bearing fruit . . . a faith that never feels challenged is most likely dead” (p. 106). Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to first dispel a common misconception about faith and the struggle for understanding. Some have assumed that anyone experiencing a crisis of faith must only be doing so because they have committed some sort of sin. As Elder Uchtdorf (2013) teaches, however: “Actually, it is not that simple” (p. 22).

Over the years, we have seen many individuals, both friends and family, experience periods of doubt – often intense – about the Church and its teachings.¹

1. Each of us has also at different times have wrestled with certain questions for which there were no easy or quick answers

Of course, in some instances, there were clear signs that these individuals were living their lives in ways that alienated them from the Spirit of God. In other cases, they simply chose to take offense at something a particular Church leader had said or done. Many times, however, the seeds of their doubts were primarily *intellectual* in nature. Of course, that does not mean that the seeds for those doubts were always the result of good scholarship or the most careful thinking and analysis. It only means that their concerns and questions were not intrinsically rooted in some *moral* failing or rebellious and sinful desire.

We have had friends, for example, who found themselves questioning their faith when they discovered that sacred temple rituals have changed (in some respects) over the past 150 years. Others who questioned their faith when they encountered statements made by early Church leaders that seemed to contradict current Church teachings. And yet others we know and love began questioning their faith when they learned that a particular teaching they thought was unchangeable doctrine turned out to be nothing of the sort. We have watched as some of our friends have called into question the spiritual authority of prophets and apostles because of the Church's teachings on sexuality, marriage, abortion, or other controversial political topics. "How can prophets speak for God," they asked, "and yet get things so wrong? How can I believe in prophetic authority when the Brethren seem to be enemies to social progress and espouse ideas so clearly on the wrong side of history?" We know of others who began to question their faith because they could not reconcile the latest theories and findings of science with the scriptural teachings they had grown up learning and believing. Then there are those whose doubts manifest a deep dissatisfaction with priesthood authority and the hierarchical structure of the Church, things they feel place unnecessary and burdensome constraints on their individual freedom and agency. Sadly, these few examples do not exhaust the issues and concerns that we have witnessed family members, friends, colleagues, students, and fellow ward members struggling with over the years – though we sincerely wish it did.

– a professional hazard, perhaps, of immersion in an academic world where skepticism and critique are cardinal virtues of the scholarly life.

By virtue of their background, therapeutic focus, and the nature of the population they typically serve, Latter-day Saint therapists frequently work with clients who are struggling with issues and concerns similar to those just mentioned. Indeed, for some clients, personal doubts about their religious beliefs and commitments, and even full-blown crises of faith, may be their primary reason for seeking counseling in the first place. For other clients, however, their doubts and suspicions may instead be a hidden or underlying source of anguish, revealed over time only as we discover that what initially seemed to be a psychological or emotional struggle is actually rooted in an even deeper spiritual or religious struggle. In many cases, religion might be so integral to a client's life that fully teasing apart psychological and emotional issues from religious issues is all but impossible. Whatever the case, it is not uncommon for issues of faith and doubt to be at the heart of our clients' psychological and emotional struggles, and, consequently, a frequent topic of therapeutic concern. In light of this, Latter-day Saint therapists have a unique responsibility to not only help their religious clients work through psychological and emotional struggles, but also to shoulder the challenge of helping those same individuals address their religious or spiritual doubts when those doubts arise in the therapeutic setting. Like the distraught father who pleaded "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24), there are many good Latter-day Saints who desire to remain faithful to the Restored Gospel, but who are not able to resolve their intellectual and spiritual concerns without loving guidance and insight from a trusted source. As Latter-day Saint therapists, professionals who – as Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1974) taught – have our "citizenship in the kingdom, but [carry a] passport into the professional world" (p. 1), we have a responsibility to do all we can to help such people navigate not only their psychological troubles, but their spiritual ones as well. It is on this challenge, and how to most thoughtfully and fruitfully meet it, that we wish to focus our analysis.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY

We must begin by acknowledging that the pain and frustration that accompanies faith crises is very real,

that the bouts of mental and emotional anguish, the gnawing doubts, and disappointments that fuel so many sleepless nights are not mere affectations. Having said that, however, we also believe that in a great many cases the struggles surrounding faith and religious commitment that so many of our clients undergo are in large measure unnecessary and avoidable – though perhaps not easily, and certainly not without serious effort being made. In short, we wish to argue that many of the questions and doubts that constitute the essential “stuff” of so many of our clients’ contemporary faith crises often spring from common (though often hidden) sources. We are convinced that many of the questions that can so easily seem as though they have no good answers – or seem only to have answers that diminish faith or lead to the abandonment of religious commitments – seem so because they are in fact grounded in questionable, typically secular, premises. In other words, it is not so much the particular questions we have regarding our faith – or even the doubts that may be generating those questions – that is the most central problem to be faced here. Rather, what we wish to argue here is that the real problem we face (both as therapists and clients dealing with sincere religious doubts) is the too-often taken-for-granted secular assumptions at the root of so many of those doubts, and which ultimately (and problematically) frame how we are to think about such things as: God, the Church, Priesthood Authority, Sexuality, Moral Agency, Science, Reason, and the nature and meaning of Faith and Truth.

While the struggles so many have as they try to make sense of their faith, of scripture, and of prophetic teachings are clearly both authentic and agonizing, perhaps the real source of frustration and confusion is that those who struggle are so often looking for the corner of a round room. Perhaps, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks (2014) has suggested, we have not been sufficiently attentive to the fact that:

... on many important subjects involving religion, Latter-day Saints think differently than many others. When I say that Latter-day Saints “think differently,” I do not suggest that we have a different way of reasoning in the sense of how we think. I am referring to the fact that on many important subjects our assumptions – our starting points or major premises – are different from many of our friends and associates. They are also

different from many assumptions currently used in the media and in other common discourse. (p. 3)

Consequently, it is all-too-often the case that we have, both as a people and as individuals, however naively and innocently, mingled the philosophies (and psychologies) of men with scripture, and in so doing, create for ourselves much unnecessary confusion, frustration, doubt, and anger. As noted historian Patrick Q. Mason (2016) has suggested:

One of the problems we have in Mormonism is that we have loaded too much in the Truth Cart. And when anything in the cart starts to rot a bit, or look unseemly upon further inspection, some have a tendency to overturn the entire cart or seek a refund for the whole lot. We have loaded so much into the Truth Cart largely because we have wanted to have the same kind of certainty about our religious claims – down to rather obscure doctrinal issues – as we do about scientific claims. . . . Many of the things which trouble people are things that we probably should never have been all that dogmatic about in the first place.

Professor Mason’s description of how some respond to their doubts will strike some readers here as painfully familiar, having no doubt worked with any number of clients who were very much in the process of “overturn[ing] the entire cart or seek[ing] a refund for the whole lot” regarding their religious beliefs and Church membership. Our hope here, however, is to provide some helpful insights for addressing such situations and the concerns of such clients. Therefore, we must now turn to a deeper exploration of just how different Latter-day Saint assumptions are, how these “different” assumptions can resolve some of the concerns our clients have, and how we might be able to help our clients recognize and understand their own assumptions (as well as the problematic implications of those assumptions).

A central plank of our argument here is that many of our clients’ most basic and most frequently professed beliefs as Latter-day Saints actually hinge on very different premises than the ones they may have unwittingly absorbed from the larger, secular world because of their engagement with and immersion in it. And, because this is so, the premises of their *questions* about those beliefs, begetting as they often do deeply painful crises of faith, matter a great deal. In short,

if the premises upon which our client's doubts are based are in fact inadequate to the task of understanding the meaning of their religious beliefs and practices in the first place, then perhaps we might help them to resolve (or even avoid) a crisis in faith by guiding them in recognizing the alien (often toxic) nature of those premises. This would be especially important given that in most cases the premises out of which our client's faith crises flow are typically unquestioned, unexamined, and, thus, remain hidden from critical notice, left to operate in profound and yet totally obscure ways. Perhaps, as Latter-day Saint therapists, we might help our clients begin to take seriously Elder Uchtdorf's (2013) invitation to "first doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith" by not only inviting them to more carefully and critically examining some of the unquestioned "secular certainties" upon which so many of their doubts seem founded, but also showing them concretely how such critical examination can be done. And, if it should turn out that those certainties are less than certain, less than the solid and stable foundation we and our clients sometimes take them to be, then it might just be that there is a way out of what otherwise seem like the insoluble conundrums of fatal crises of faith.

In his essay "The Overlooked Bondage of Our Common Sense," James E. Faulconer (2014) trenchantly observed:

The tightest cords of bondage are those we are unaware of. The most willing slave does not recognize that she is a slave, thinking that what she does is what she has chosen to do, though she has been manipulated into doing it. We are most in danger of this particular bondage when what we think or do seems "perfectly natural" or "perfectly reasonable." The things that we think are beyond question are the very things that can most easily deceive us to the point of bondage.

In other words, while our clients' may well be sincerely trying to live their lives in harmony with what they take to be gospel teachings, they nonetheless may have absorbed certain ways of thinking, certain commonly accepted ideas, certain values and perspectives, that are actually quite toxic to a vibrant and coherent faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One reason that such ways of thinking are so easily and smoothly

absorbed and adopted is because they seem so commonsensical, so ordinary and reasonable, simply the way things really are. And, they can seem to be so precisely because they are so seldom, if ever, seriously questioned. Indeed, it is not uncommon for heretofore faithful, believing Latter-day Saints to slowly (and sometimes surprisingly) begin to realize that what they actually believe is neither what they thought they believed nor what they may have long professed to believe. Many religious clients find the experience of burgeoning unbelief and "creeping doubt" to be greatly distressing, especially when they do not understand where their doubts are coming from or what they can do with them. Simply being encouraged to doubt their doubts, but not being provided with the tools or skills or the alternative perspectives necessary to successfully do so, can sometimes prove to be quite frustrating and even more discouraging. Helping our clients learn how to question their own assumptions – particularly those masquerading as secular certainties – is one vital way in which we as faithful, believing therapists can be of genuine service to clients struggling with unbelief and doubt.

HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS

In the opening paragraphs of his powerful essay *Men Without Chests*, the famous writer and Christian apologist C. S. Lewis provides an excellent example of exactly how this sort of thing can happen. Lewis begins his essay by discussing a subtle way in which relativism (moral and otherwise) can be insinuated into our thinking. He does this by examining a seemingly innocuous passage in a commonly used textbook for high school students of his day, a book he dubs *The Green Book*.² The authors of the textbook, Lewis notes, relate a story in which the famous poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge overhears two tourists describing a waterfall, one of them calling the waterfall "sublime" and the other calling it "pretty." The textbook authors then write:

When the man said *This is sublime*, he appeared to be making a remark about the waterfall . . . Actually . . . he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings. What he was saying

2. No connection whatsoever to the title or topic of the recent Oscar-winning movie.

was really *I have feelings associated in my mind with the word "Sublime,"* or shortly, *I have sublime feelings . . .* This confusion is continually present in language as we use it. We appear to be saying something very important about something; and actually we are only saying something about our own feelings. (Lewis, 2001, pp. 2-3)

Lewis (2001) notes that, "The schoolboy who reads this passage in *The Green Book* will believe two propositions: firstly, that all sentences containing a predicate of value are statements about the emotional state of the speaker, and secondly, that all such statements are unimportant" (p. 3). In other words, in studying this text students come not only learn the fundamentals of English grammar and usage (as intended), but far more subtly and insidiously they also come to learn what Lewis calls moral subjectivism.

According to Lewis scholar Adam C. Pelsler (2017), "[Moral] Subjectivism is the view that value claims such as 'Murder is wrong,' which might seem to be claims about objective (mind independent) values, are simply reports about the subjective emotions of the speaker (e.g., 'I have a disapproving feeling toward murder'), which are no more about objective values than statements such as 'I have an itch' or 'I'm going to be sick'" (p. 7). Now, Lewis is clear that the book's authors have said none of these things, at least not explicitly. Rather, he notes, "The pupils are left to do for themselves the work of extending the same treatment to all predicates of value: and no slightest obstacle to such extension is placed in their way" (2001, p. 4). In the end, Lewis' concern is not so much with the authors' intentions behind what they have written, whether they are being nefarious or simply naïve and sloppy, but "with the effect their book will certainly have on the schoolboy's mind" (p. 5). He continues:

Their words are that we 'appear to be saying something very important' when in reality we are 'only saying something about our own feelings'. No schoolboy will be able to resist the suggestion brought to bear upon him by that word *only*. I do not mean, of course, that he will make any conscious inference from what he reads to a general philosophical theory that all values are subjective and trivial. The very power of [the book's authors] depends on the fact that they are dealing with a boy: a boy who thinks he is 'doing' his 'English prep' and has no notion that ethics, theology, and politics are all at stake. It is not a theory they put into his mind,

but an assumption, which ten years hence, its origins forgotten and its presence unconscious, will condition him to take one side in a controversy which he has never recognized as a controversy at all. (p. 5)

In short, without really recognizing what is happening, the students' minds and values are subtly being shaped here so that they will in time come to view the world in particular ways, and consequently, assume particular values. Indeed, this shaping process is so subtle (and actually involves far more sources of influence than just one English grammar textbook) that its fruit seldom ripens until many years have passed.

Lewis's central worry, both in this particular essay and many others, is the way in which the metaphysical assumptions (and their attendant values) that undergird the passages that students read in this textbook (and many similar others) exert a powerful though unnoticed influence on the development of the students' most basic understanding of themselves, of the world, and of God. The influence of these hidden assumptions and values is so powerful precisely because they are latent, things merely implied in passing, inscribed in a sort of invisible ink on the white space between words and sentences on a page. Such indoctrination – and make no mistake this is a process of indoctrination – takes place by means of a sort of educational and cultural osmosis through which an entire worldview slowly accretes over time like sediment in a river delta, both taking shape in and giving shape to the student's mind, desires, and aspirations. It is only over time that this process manages to turn young, eager, trusting students, Lewis argues, into "men without chests." Indeed, as Lewis (1970a) elsewhere writes, "the sources of unbelief among young people today do not lie in those young people. The outlook which they have . . . is a backwash from an earlier period. It is nothing intrinsic to themselves which holds them back from the Faith" (p. 116).

If Lewis' example is both particularly illustrative and generally applicable, as we believe it is, then it has much to teach about how exactly it is our clients can come to possess certain perspectives and assumptions, taking them for granted as mere commonsense, as they go about trying to make sense of themselves, God, others, and the world. Additionally, Lewis provides us with an important warning about the dangerous consequences that attend any attempt to understand

one's religious commitments and faith in the context of questions that arise out of unrecognized secular assumptions – assumptions masquerading as confirmed certainties, received wisdom, and common knowledge. After all, Lewis (1970a) contends, “a man whose mind was formed in a period of cynicism and disillusion, cannot teach of hope or fortitude” (p. 116).

In a related essay, Lewis tackles what he takes to be the central challenge of Christian apologetics, or the direct and explicit defense of the reasonableness and coherence of the Christian faith. Lewis recognizes that while it is a worthy endeavor in its own right, the formal work of apologetics faces an immense challenge in its efforts to win hearts and minds, strengthen the faith commitments of believers, and invite others to “come unto Christ.” He writes:

We can make people (often) attend to the Christian point of view for half an hour or so; but the moment they have gone away from our lecture or laid down our article, they are plunged back into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted. As long as that situation exists, widespread success is simply impossible . . . Our Faith is not very likely to be shaken by any book on Hinduism. But if whenever we read an elementary book on Geology, Botany, Politics, or Astronomy [*and, as a psychologist, I would add Psychology*], we found that its implications were Hindu, that would shake us. *It is not the books written in direct defense of Materialism [i.e., secularism] that make the modern man a materialist; it is the materialistic assumptions in all the other books.* (Lewis, 1970b, p. 93; emphasis added)

Professor Lewis's point here is that ideas, facts, findings, insights, arguments, or what have you, do not come into the world, and are not communicated to us, as isolated atoms of information, as bits of knowledge existing pristinely independent of context or background suppositions. Rather, the information we (and our clients) glean from the textbooks we read, the podcasts we listen to, the Facebook posts we read, the memes we share, the lectures we attend, the movies we stream and television shows we watch, is always grounded in some worldview, some set of assumptions about the nature of the world and what about it is worth knowing or saying. For example, despite the pervasiveness of what has been termed “the myth of neutrality” (Slife, Reber, & Lefevor, 2012), a very popular modern myth about the nature of science,

educational researcher Kathy Hall (2003) reminds us, “No knowledge is neutral, but rather is always based on some . . . perception of reality and on some . . . perspective of what is important to know” (p. 176). Thus, Lewis cautions us to sup carefully as we learn and study so that we do not consume a rival worldview, one hostile to our Christianity, one that seeks to repudiate and replace it, without a clear awareness and understanding of what exactly it is we are doing and what its likely consequences might prove to be.

SECULAR LITURGIES

In a spirit similar to that of Professor Lewis, Christian philosopher and cultural critic James K. A. Smith (2016) has written extensively on what he identifies as “secular liturgies” (see also, Smith, 2009, 2012, 2014). Typically understood to refer to religious activities and rituals, most often public in nature, by which individuals worship together, liturgies constitute “identity-forming practices” (Smith, 2012, p. 161) that are meant to shape and refine the contours of one's religious life and self-understanding in a very concrete and embodied and social manner. “For those who practice faith,” Smith (2016) writes, “faith takes practice. And such practice is embodied and material; it is communal and liturgical; it involves eating and drinking, dancing and kneeling, painting and singing” (pp. 160-161). As such, liturgical practices ground and guide and nurture our desires and imagination in ways that define for us the meanings of our lives in subtle, nuanced, and intimate ways because they are “loaded with an ultimate Story about who we are and what we're for” (Smith, 2016, p. 46). Smith (2016) notes, “they carry with them a kind of ultimate orientation” (p. 46) that points us toward a deeper understanding of our nature, purpose, the meaning of our lives, and those moral and spiritual goods to which we ought to aspire. One need only think of the ritual blessing and passing of the Sacrament every Sunday, the daily observance of the Law of Chastity or the Word of Wisdom, or the immersive and embodied nature of LDS temple worship to see how such things are liturgical in nature. This is especially clear as one considers how such ritual observances embody ways of conveying truth and deepening personal understanding quite different than we see in the systematic interpretation

of sacred texts, or the study of abstract doctrines and formal beliefs. Liturgies involve the whole person in what is at best only a partial cognitive or intellectual task of sense-making as they invite immersion in communal activity, rather than retreat into solitary critical reflection. As Richards and James (2020) note in their recent book *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes*, “the most important things in a culture usually go without being said” (p. 2).

Although usually associated with religion, Smith (2012) demonstrates “that there are practices and institutions that have the same function and force” as religious liturgies but which we do not recognize as such, even though they also embody “rituals and practices that shape our attunement to what is ultimate” (p. 161). Smith’s provocative and penetrating analysis shows that there are indeed secular liturgies that orient us toward a “rival understanding of the [Christian] good life” (p. 161), but which we – in our immersion in the secular world of common cultural practice that gives birth to, and sustains and nurtures, such a rival understanding – seldom ever recognize as being such at all. And, because we do not recognize the “secular liturgies” in which we participate to be liturgies in the first place, we have little sense of how they are continually shaping and guiding us toward new and different conclusions than those consonant with our faith. “Ultimately, Smith (2016) points out, “when such liturgies are *disordered*, aimed at rival kingdoms, they are pointing us away from our magnetic north in Christ” (p. 47). The predictable outcome, Smith (2016) notes, is that “Our loves and longings are steered wrong, not because we’ve been hoodwinked by bad ideas, but because we’ve been immersed in de-formative liturgies and not realized it. As a result, we absorb a very different Story about the *telos* of being human and norms of flourishing” (p. 47).

By way of example, Smith (2009) writes in considerable detail about such secular liturgies – or what he also terms “pedagogies of desire” (p. 24) – as “the liturgies of mall and market” (pp. 93-103), the liturgies of nationalism, entertainment, and the stadium (pp. 103-112), and the “liturgy of the university” (pp. 112-121). In each of these instances, Smith shows how the ordinary activities of people’s daily social and political lives are shot-through with assumptions about the nature of truth, God, the human soul, and the good life that

rival those that provide the conceptual foundation for genuine Christian worship and understanding. Unfortunately, because these activities are so commonplace, so utterly ordinary and widely shared, the nature of their underlying assumptions – and the potentially corrosive implications of those assumptions, both for our clients’ own self-understandings and for their understanding of the meaning and possibilities of their religious faith and covenants – often goes unnoticed, even as our clients’ doubts about their faith mount and their commitment to their covenants wanes.

EGOCENTRISM

Among the perspectives that these secular liturgies may instantiate for our clients is one in which human nature is taken to be fundamentally and inescapably egocentric. That is, in our larger culture, people are taught to see themselves as essentially self-contained individuals, continuously seeking gratification in a world of potential costs and benefits, and their relationships with others primarily in terms of the economic exchange of goods and services (see Wilkens & Sanford, 2009). One need not have ever taken a formal course in Rational Choice Theory from an Economics professor, or study Social Exchange Theory with a psychologist, to be initiated into a worldview in which all human motivation is reducible to self-interest and the quest for the maximization of personal pleasure (Gantt & Williams, 2019). One need only turn on the television and watch a few advertisements, take a trip to the local mall for some shopping, enter the workplace to earn one’s keep, or visit a marriage counselor for a bit of couple’s therapy (Reckwitz, 2020). In each instance, the forms of living and relationship that structure and give direction to the social practices in which clients engage, as well as the norms and expectations (both written and unwritten) that serve to maintain and enforce these practices, assume a world of fundamentally independent egos arrayed against one another in a relentless competition for scarce resources (Gantt & Burton, 2013). Social life is, according to the secular liturgies in play here, fundamentally a matter of negotiation, the weighing of risk and opportunity in an endless dance meant to secure maximum profit, whether in terms of such

goods as fame, personal happiness, wealth, security, or recognition and the love of others.

AUTONOMY AND DETERMINISM

In a related way, these secular liturgies nurture a self-understanding in which our clients have often come to see themselves as autonomous agents cast into a world of near-infinite choices, responsible only to themselves for the choices they make, uniquely able to define for themselves the moral quality (if any) and meaning of those choices. The promise of self-actualization and true fulfillment they have been taught comes through the unfettered freedom of the individual will. Likewise, they may have come to see life as essentially just a vast panoply of possibilities, any and all ripe for the taking. For some, one of the most important factors in determining our choices is personal preference and the guidance of individual desire. Thus, in much the same way one might choose a particular shirt or pair of shoes from among the various styles on offer in the parade of shop windows at the local mall, our clients may see the world as simply a place where they are to select whatever lifestyle happens to “work” best for them at the moment. Human agency, they may have come to believe, is “free agency,” or the fundamentally individual freedom to do whatever they happen to want, whenever they want, and however they might want (at least, that is, insofar as doing so does not restrict the freedom of another person to do the same). In fact, they may well interpret scriptural and prophetic teachings about agency in just this way, thereby making it all the harder to uncover the secular origins and nature of such an understanding of agency.³

Ironically, at the same time, it is important to note that some secular liturgies work to form our clients’ self-understanding such that they may believe that certain important areas of their lives fall outside the bounds of their exercise of agency or their meaningful participation. For example, clients may have come to believe that in regard to key features of their identity they are a species of “things to be acted upon” (2 Ne. 2:14), beholden to the determinative forces of powerful abstractions, biological conditions, or contingent

socio-cultural forces operating outside of their awareness or control. Thus, on the one hand, they may envision themselves as “free agents,” choosing how and who they will be in a marketplace of enticing options; while, on the other hand, they are convinced that some of the most defining features of their identity are things in the formation of which they play no real, active part, and before which they are ultimately rendered more or less powerless.

SEXUALITY

Perhaps one of the best examples of this sort of thinking can be seen in the way some clients, reflecting back the general consensus of our larger secular culture, understand their sexuality. That is, having absorbed certain basic assumptions about the nature of human sexuality through various secular liturgies, our clients may believe (along with many in our modern world) that sexuality is essentially a mysteriously powerful abstraction that is the central fact of human identity and purpose, and, as such, functions as the basic source of many of our deepest feelings and desires. In this way, sexuality is taken to be the core element of personality that defines for us (*a priori*) who we really are, how we must feel, and how we must act – if, that is, we wish to live authentic and fulfilling lives. Our sexuality, we are informed, is that about us which we must choose to discover, explore, and embrace, and yet equally that about us which has been thrust upon us by forces beyond our control (e.g., by our genes). This widely accepted assertion is exemplified in Lehmillers’ (2018) popular textbook on the psychology of human sexuality:

As a starting point, it is useful to acknowledge that every single sexual act is the result of several powerful forces acting upon one or more persons. These forces included our individual psychology, our genetic background and evolved history, as well as the current social and cultural context in which we live. Some of these influences favor sexual activity, whereas others oppose it. Whether sex occurs at any given moment depends on which forces are strongest at the time. (p. 2)

In short, Lehmillers asserts that human sexual desires and relationships are best understood in much the same way that Newtonian physics might understand the motions and mutually influencing

3. For an excellent discussion of the difference between the scriptural concept of “moral agency” and the notion of “free agency,” see Judd (2005).

behaviors of planets and other physical objects (see Gantt & Williams, 2014).

In this secular view, sexual desire is not something we do, it is not an agentic and moral expression of meaningful relationships and purposes; rather, it is simply taken to be the effect of mechanical forces beyond our control (or, even, our awareness), forces that serve to constitute us as who we are and cannot help but be. “It is clear,” Lehmiller (2018) states – echoing, we believe, the general consensus of both our discipline and our larger secular society – “that human sexuality is determined by multiple factors” (p. 20). Unfortunately, especially for Latter-day Saints struggling to make sense of their sexual desires and relationships, moral agency is seldom, if ever, thought to be one of those factors. In the moral context of the modern world, reconciliation with the inescapable givenness and power of one’s sexuality resembles a sort of hopeless resignation to one’s fate, but is nonetheless, at least in the eyes of many, something that is taken to be of paramount existential, psychological, and even political importance. Given the pervasiveness of such views, it is perhaps no surprise that so many of our clients are not at all accustomed to thinking through the possibility of reconciling their desires, sexual or otherwise, to the will of Christ. Instead, they assume that if they are to remain faithful to their covenants, they are thereby consigned to a life of unrelenting struggle against their sexual identity, required to deny their fundamental sexual nature, relegated to a constant war within themselves.

THE FACT-VALUE DICHOTOMY

Another way in which our clients’ immersion in the secular liturgies of our day can foster serious religious concerns that present in therapy can be seen in the way these liturgies seduce into believing what scholars have termed the “fact-value dichotomy” (Marchetti & Marchetti, 2017). This term refers to the notion that there is a fundamental difference between those things that can be known to be true and those things that are merely matters of the personal preference of individuals. Intimately (and inextricably) connected to this dichotomy is the assumption that Reason, in the guise of Science, is the final authority on what can be known to be true and how it is to be known, while

Faith and Religion are held to be epistemologically suspect, hopelessly subjective in nature and speaking only of personal beliefs and private moral values. Indeed, because of this commonly assumed distinction, a product of the secular liturgies that pervade modern political and educational life, clients often feel an overwhelming demand to hold only those beliefs and engage in only those practices that can be shown to be valid in the light of the methods and findings of scientific rationality. And, should science happen not to confirm of their religious beliefs, clients may feel trapped by the sense that the only viable alternative available to them is fideism, the notion that because Reason and Faith are inescapably hostile to one another religious belief can only ever be unjustifiable and irrational.

In this way, religious faith can quickly come to be seen as little more than a “crutch” for those who have yet to arrive at certainty, or who are not strong enough to “face reality” by accepting the facts of the world as modern science has revealed them. Faith, then, is reduced to a sort of psychological coping strategy for those who are unable to accept the world as it really is in all its harsh, unrelenting pointlessness and finitude – a reality the rational mind of the scientist knows to be true irrespective of whatever the irrational mind of the believer might hope to be the case. Evidence, we are told, is the currency of Reason and Science, and thus the source of their authority, while blind faith, belief without foundation, is said to be the essence of religious life (see, e.g., Coyne, 2015; Philipse, 2012; Stegner, 2012). It is, perhaps, no wonder then, immersed as our clients are at almost every turn in the secular liturgies founding and reinforcing such views, that so many of them come to therapy these days in the agonizing grip of deep doubts and the struggle to find answers to questions of faith. Indeed, it is surprising that not more do so.

After long and careful study, however, we have come to believe it most unfortunate that clients so often accept a view of faith in which it is taken to be simply what one is forced to settle for when a thing cannot be known for certain. It is even more troublesome that some religiously inclined therapists encourage this line of thinking, urging their clients to just “hope for the best” in order to stifle their doubts. However, the presumption that Reason and Faith are antithetical

to one another, and that only modern science, as the principle domain of human rationality, can achieve certainty, and, thus, reliable knowledge, is a presumption that even many firmly secular thinkers find to lack merit (see, e.g., Bernstein, 1983; Pasnau, 2017; Yanofsky, 2013). Indeed, upon careful reflection, it is quite clear that scientific rationality is grounded in much that is taken on faith and that “faith has its reasons” (see, e.g., Boa & Bowman, 2005). A number of scholars have shown that not only are faith and reason not diametrically opposed to one another, but also that faith – as a trust born of intimate human experience – is reliable and steadying in ways that human reason and scientific thought are not and cannot be (Davis, 1999; Moreland, 2018; Plantinga, 2011; Williams, 2008). While there are assuredly areas of inquiry in which Latter-day Saint therapists and their clients must both defer to the methods and findings of empirical science, it is by no means the case that scientific rationality holds the keys to answering all of life’s important questions. Indeed, such a claim smacks more of scientism, the reigning secular religion of science, than of genuine science itself (Gantt & Williams, 2018; Moreland, 2018; Williams & Robinson, 2015).

IMPLICATIONS AND ALTERNATIVES

Unfortunately, far too often, the formation and developmental progression of our clients’ worldview assumptions (as well as our own) is something that takes place without these assumptions ever being articulated in any explicit way, and without the secular origins of these assumptions ever being fully laid bare. Thus, our clients have often been profoundly shaped by the secular liturgies of our larger culture, but without ever having genuinely considered the logical, moral, or spiritual implications of the liturgies that ground their thinking. Consequently, few of them devote any serious effort to exploring the nature and implications of the sort of alternative assumptions Elder Oaks likely had in mind. It is in this way, we believe, that clients so often struggle to “doubt [their] doubts.” By not sufficiently interrogating their frequently taken-for-granted secular assumptions about religious belief and the nature of faith, and by not working through viable alternative starting

assumptions, our clients may feel as though there is no ground upon which to stand in order to even begin to doubt their doubts. Likewise, our clients can fail to seriously doubt their doubts by thinking only in terms of the pre-given categories of analysis or established dichotomies that secular thought provides, and thereby seriously misunderstand – or even just be blind to – alternative possibilities, the topography of issues at hand, and the true nature of the questions fueling their crises of faith.

MORAL AGENCY

For example, it is not unusual for many of our clients to understand the nature of divine commandments and priesthood authority in the context of the age-old “Freewill versus Determinism” debate. This is an ongoing cultural and political debate, as well as an academic one, in which human agency is either denied at the outset (Determinism), on the one hand, or conceived primarily in terms of boundless individual autonomy, on the other (McKenna & Pereboom, 2016). For many people, both in and out of the Church, this dichotomy can seem not only natural, but also exhaustive. That is, it just simply is the case that either we are free beings capable of independently choosing to do whatever we wish, or we are simply the victims of external forces, be they biological, environmental, psychological, or societal, acting on us in subtle and powerful ways so as to produce our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. For a people whose religious teachings are suffused with the language of agency, freedom, and choice, however, it is no surprise that Latter-day Saints tend to be uncomfortable with the concepts of determinism. Consequently, drawing on the basic categories provided by our larger (secular) cultural context and its various liturgies, we tend to think of and talk about agency as “free agency” – a non-scriptural mash-up of the secular concept “free will” and the doctrinal term “moral agency.”⁴ In so doing, we most often (mis)understand agency as a matter of autonomy – literally “self-law” (Greek: “*auto*” and “*nomos*”) – such that we believe agency is entirely a matter of our capacity to make free, unfettered choices from amongst

4. Elder Boyd K. Packer (1992) repeatedly taught, “The phrase ‘free agency’ does not appear in scripture. The only agency spoken of there is *moral agency*” (p. 67; emphasis in the original).

the panoply of alternatives and possibilities life happens to offer us.

While moral agency, as taught in scripture and by Latter-day prophets and apostles, most certainly does require the capacity to make meaningful choices and the ability to act for ourselves, viewing our agency and freedom in terms of individual autonomy can lead to serious difficulties when trying to make sense of divine commandments, priesthood authority, or prophetic counsel. Thus, it is not unusual to find that some who are struggling to reconcile their faith with the teachings and directions of priesthood leaders do so because they see external authority (spiritual or otherwise) as something that necessarily infringes on their personal autonomy. When agency is conceived in this fashion, commandments are seen as inherently onerous, burdensome, and constraining, intrinsically placing limits on the individual exercise of “free agency.” Rather than understanding agency as inherently moral and situated in a context of meanings, responsibilities, and shared possibilities – and, thus, commandments as a vital way of giving both moral texture and guidance in that context – agency is understood in terms of the powers of self-determination as possessed by self-contained egos for whom any external directive or expectation is necessarily intrusive and confining. Granted, the individual freely and independently chooses to accede to the confinement of obedience to external commands, but the very reality of being commanded by another, even God, for any reason is still typically seen as a burden of some sort, rather than a boon.

If moral agency is not essentially about possessing the autonomous freedom to choose to do as one pleases independent of influence, context, or constraint, however, then one might well ask what else it could possibly be. If we reject the concept of agency as individual autonomy (i.e., indeterminist will), is the only alternative to embrace one or another form of determinism (whether biological, mechanical, sociological, or what have you), along with its inescapable logic of nihilism (Gantt, Reber, & Hyde, 2013)? Fortunately, a number of scholars have taken these questions head-on and provided fruitful and insightful perspectives on human agency from sophisticated, as well as gospel-friendly, perspectives (see, e.g., Gantt & Williams, 2014; Hansen, 2017; Judd, 2005; Slife &

Fisher, 2000; Williams, 2005, 2017; Yanchar, 2011, 2018). A central finding of the various analyses of these scholars is that while it not possible to render a conceptually coherent and meaningful account of human agency as “free agency” (i.e., autonomous, indeterminate willing), it is possible to offer such an account in which agency is understood as fundamentally contextual, embodied, and intrinsically morally, and thus relationally, situated.

A deeper recounting of the arguments put forward regarding the nature of moral agency is beyond the scope of our analysis here. Suffice it to say that an alternative starting point for discussing commandments and freedom with our clients might be to think of agency not so much as the ability to make unfettered, independent choices, but rather as “having the truth or *living truthfully*” (Williams, 2005, p. 131). As Richard Williams (2005) has argued, it is vital to understanding the nature of our moral agency that we take seriously its intimate connection to truth. After all, Christ has assured us that it is the truth that makes us free (John 8:32), and that He is in fact that very truth. Real freedom comes from being even as He is, living as He does, perceiving and understanding and valuing as He does. Williams (2005) writes:

Lacking truth, we are prevented from tapping into that within us which inclines toward perfection and beckons us to be like our Father is. Understanding the nature of God, understanding the truth about ourselves and what it means to be the kinds of beings we are, knowing in our hearts the truth of the atoning grace of Jesus Christ, and realizing the reality of our moral purpose on earth – these are the truths that make us free. These are the truths that provide the opportunity for the flourishing of the moral agency with which we are endowed. (p. 132)

In other words, divine commandments, priesthood authority, and the counsel and guidance that flows from that authority and those commandments, do not constitute an infringement on the self-contained power of our individual autonomy so much as they are an invitation to real freedom – and, indeed, a powerful challenge to the false notion that we are first and foremost autonomous individuals. The truth that is revealed in Christ, and shared with us by means of prophetic counsel and teaching, “gives us freedom

from sin, self-deception, and falsity – from all those construals of the world that hold us captive and prevent us from being who we, from a more truthful perspective, really are and what we, from an eternal perspective, might become” (Williams, 2005, p. 132). Commandments are, thus, not constraints on our personal freedom, but rather the very framework for any meaningful freedom in the first place.

Unfortunately, by teaching clients to value individual autonomy on the path to overcoming psychological challenges, therapists may actually be encouraging their clients (however innocently) in a direction that further intensifies religious doubts rather than offering a fruitful perspective for tackling those doubts. Addressing questions of agency primarily from within a conceptual framework that equates agency with unfettered individual autonomy can actually encourage clients to question or reject the moral authority of the Church, of the prophets and apostles, and ultimately of God in determining what is and what is not sinful or acceptable behavior for them. This equation of agency with autonomy stands in sharp contrast to understanding human agency, not as the freedom to do whatever one wants, but as the capacity to do as one should (Williams, 2005). By helping clients appreciate important distinctions between “free agency” (and its secular presumptions) and moral agency (and its scriptural foundations), therapists can better serve clients who are struggling and help them towards greater insight about the role sacred commandments and prophetic counsel play in providing a grounding moral context for properly weighing and valuing various beliefs and behaviors. Further, therapists can assist clients in coming to a deeper understanding of how it is that Divine commandments are not the harsh demands or impositions of an external power meant to control or subjugate one’s will, but are rather loving invitations to live in a morally richer and spiritually peace-filled way that is more harmony with truth and reality.

HUMAN SEXUALITY

Another area in which our clients sometimes struggle to make sense of their faith, particularly in light of the secular certainties they may have absorbed from our larger culture, is concerned with the

question of human sexuality and its relationship (or, more accurately, presumed non-relationship) with moral agency. It is commonplace in our modern world to hear sexuality spoken of as though it were a powerful abstraction – one that, by virtue of the pervasive causal efficacy it possesses, defines identity at its most basic level, and determines the content and aim of our most intimate desires, attractions, and thoughts. Consequently, many people, including our clients, tend to assume, with little serious reflection, that people “have” or “possess” a “sexuality” or a “sexual orientation” – something that is most likely rooted in genetics, and which is responsible for how people are attracted to others, whom they will find most sexually intriguing, and why they will perceive themselves and others as they do. Indeed, this thing known as “sexuality” is often taken to be so central to our clients’ identity that it colors and frames almost everything else about them, so much so that, for many, almost every other aspect of their lives is thought to be best understood from the lens of sexuality. Indeed, for some, sexual politics is held to be the inescapable and founding context for understanding all interpersonal relationships (see, e.g., Ray, Carlson, & Andrews, 2018). The secular liturgies of the modern world persistently seek to shape us to believe that to live an authentic and fulfilling life, we must discover our “sexuality,” learn to “accept” it, take opportunities to “explore” it, strive to become “comfortable” with it, and find ever more satisfying ways in which to “express” it. In fact, many voices assert that unless people do such things, and, in the end, give free reign to their “sexuality,” the inevitable result will be deep psychological pain and anxiety, crippling depression, or even suicide (Pumariega & Sharma, 2018).

Many claim that science has unequivocally demonstrated (at least to the satisfaction of any reasonable person) that sexual orientation is a fixed and determinative category of being, and, thus, is non-agentic in nature (see, e.g., Lehmilller, 2018; Weill, 2009). Nonetheless, serious questions about both the validity of the methods and the soundness of the logic undergirding the interpretation of such research persist unanswered (see, e.g. Mayer & McHugh, 2016). The issue we wish to raise here, however, is not so much about whether the reductive interpretations of various scientific findings, or the impassioned arguments of various activists

across the political spectrum, have merit. Rather, what is important to understand here is the way in which pervasive secular certainties about the nature of sexual desire, especially when hidden because they have been left unexamined, can facilitate a faith crisis in response to prophetic and scriptural teachings that run counter to received cultural wisdom about such things as same-sex attraction, marriage, and transgenderism. It is not surprising to find so many members of the Church struggling to understand Church teachings and policies regarding sexual intimacy and marriage in the face of what is a taken-for-granted truth of our modern world: sexuality is identity. That is, one's sexual orientation is taken to be who and what one is, and limiting or constraining the full embrace and expression of who one is, is intrinsically oppressive, harmful, hateful, and even perhaps spiritually destructive. For some, in fact, any prohibitions against personally desired expressions of one's sexuality are seen as inherently and manifestly unfair and unjust (see, e.g., Teunis & Herdt, 2007).

Unfortunately, as with so many issues over which our clients struggle, not only of their faith commitments but also of the obligations placed upon them by that faith, the struggle over sexuality is one whose roots lie in secular soil rather than gospel sod. Despite our modern propensity to think of and explain the world and ourselves in terms of powerful abstractions – what one scholar has termed “the metaphysic of things” (Williams, 1990) – it is not at all clear that such thinking is coherent on its own terms, much less consonant with a gospel-centered worldview. Indeed, as Jeffrey Thayne and Gantt (2019) have argued elsewhere, our modern fascination with abstractions is a tradition inherited from our Greek intellectual ancestors, and not a feature of the Hebrew worldview articulated in both ancient and modern scripture. In contrast to abstractionism, the scriptural or Hebrew worldview is one in which “truth is *not* a set of abstract ideas, but a living, breathing Person who loves us as His children” (Thayne & Gantt, 2019, p. 3). The focus in such a perspective is fundamentally on the dynamic and relational, on the unfolding of contextual meaning in the vibrant ongoing activities of daily life and experience, rather than on the pre-given, the static, or the metaphysically distant, unembodied, atemporal and impersonal. This is a worldview in which such things

as moral depth, meaningful agency, and divine activity (in the form of intimate and continuous personal relationship between Creator and created) are understood to be the very warp and woof of reality.

Working outward from such premises, then, it becomes easier to see the grounding context for President Nelson's recent comments in the April 2017 General Conference regarding the nature or the Atonement of Jesus Christ. President Nelson (2017) 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)

In other words, the atonement of Christ is no powerful abstraction with an existence independent of our engagement with Him. Rather, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ is “the central *act* of all human history,” both an historical and an ongoing event that lives and breathes in the unfolding and dynamic relationship we have with Christ here and now, in the immediacy and pulsating context of daily existence. President Nelson (2017) continued:

The importance of the Savior's mission was emphasized by the Prophet Joseph Smith, who declared emphatically that “the fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried,

and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it. (p. 40)

Note carefully that the language of “fundamental principles” employed here by the Prophet Joseph Smith refers directly to specific events and acts – the bearing of testimonies by Apostles and Prophets about encounters with Christ and the events of His life and ministry – rather than abstract entities or hypothetical constructs. Indeed, as Williams (1998) has argued: “The truth claims of Mormonism rest on *events*” (p. 2).

Thus, we believe it is worth considering the possibility that if something as sacred and intimately relevant to our lives as the Atonement of Christ is not best understood as an abstraction, then it is likely that something as sacred and intimately relevant to our lives as sexuality is also not best understood in terms of abstractions. Indeed, we believe it is more enlightening and instructive to think of sexuality in terms of actual sexual relationships, concrete acts of sexual intimacy, specific contexts of sexual desire and experiential meaning, and the inescapable moral framework within which sexual desire and relationship takes place. In such an approach, the achievement of “sexual agency” (Albanesi, 2010) is not about freeing ourselves from the behavioral constraints of external authorities so we can freely choose how best to obtain sexual gratification of whatever desires happen to arise out of the sexual orientation we possess. Rather, sexual agency is fundamentally a matter of the way in which we, as moral agents situated in relationship with Christ and our eternal brothers and sisters, “give ourselves over to” and “take up” various meaningful possibilities of sexual relationship and moral understanding.

In the context of therapy, then, we can help our clients with their struggle against unbelief by helping them to appreciate how their sexual identity is not something that governs them, something abstract, fixed, and causally determinative to which they must surrender themselves in order to be at peace. To the contrary, we can help them see how such a viewpoint is rooted in secular assumptions that are not consonant with the teachings of scripture and the counsel of apostles and prophets. We can help our clients come to see that sexuality, rather than being some fixed state

or condition, is an unfolding and dynamic event that flows out of their continuous “taking on” of the various meanings and moral possibilities of sexual desire as experienced in the relationships and activities of their daily lives, obligations, and responsibilities (Williams & Gantt, 2018). In this perspective, then, sexual identity and sexual desire are neither things pushed into nor pulled out of our clients by powerful abstractions such as drives, needs, or orientations. And, thus, our clients’ sexual identities and desires need be no more central to their lives than any of the other meaningful phenomena of which their lives are made. Indeed, it is often the case that when it seems to our clients that their sexual identity is of more importance than anything else, it is usually because of the particular fashion in which they have taken on and given themselves over to sexual relationships, activities, and meanings.

It goes without saying that such a view of sexuality, one in which sexual desires are understood as intrinsically active and morally agentic, has implications for a wide variety of human activities, including diagnoses and therapies, interpersonal relationships, marriages and families, and our larger conceptions of morality and what constitutes “the good life.” It also has implications for our deepest aspirations, chiefly among which is our understanding of what it means to be a human being and to be “at-one” with one another and with Christ. Additionally, it opens up a deeper understanding of our nature as fundamentally moral agents, and in so doing shows that agency is not about exerting one’s will over one’s own (biologically based and driven) sexual desires in order to maintain the necessary degree of self-control. In contrast, the view we are outlining here is one in which sexual agency *as* moral agency is a matter of living one’s sexual desires and aspirations, one’s relationships and self-understanding in ways that are harmonious with the will of Christ. In this view, unlike that propounded by secular liturgies, neither is our “sexual orientation” our most basic identity, nor are we hopelessly governed by abstract forces that dictate our desires and demand their gratification. Rather, we are children of a Heavenly Father, made in His image and likeness, and equipped at the very core of our being with the very moral agency He enjoys. And, as His beloved children, we are continually invited to desire as and what He does, to aspire to live the manner of life He lives, and to comport

ourselves with one another as He does and for the same reasons that He does. Fortunately, as fundamentally moral agents situated in morally meaningful and consequentially relational contexts, we are uniquely positioned – indeed, uniquely blessed – to be able to do just that.

COUNTERING DUALISM

One common response to what we are proposing here is that, in emphasizing the centrality of moral agency in our account of the meaning and nature of sexuality, we have not paid sufficient attention to the legitimately powerful role that biology plays in generating the psychological phenomena of sexual desire (Lehmiller, 2017). For example, as Balthazart (2012) asserts, “We can choose to accept [our sexual] orientation, to act accordingly, and to reveal it or not to the society, but the orientation itself is not in any way a deliberate choice” (p. 159). In this view, it is the impressive casual powers of biology that play the primary role in accounting for sexual desires and attractions, with the mind (or spirit), as the locus of human will and choice, playing a secondary role, one concerned only with behavioral matters, and not the more central issues of feelings, identity, and basic sense of self. However, while firmly agreeing that sexual desire and action cannot be adequately understood absent a careful account of the biological conditions of human embodiment, we would argue that such objections reflect an essentially and fundamentally secular, dualistic (Cartesian) conception of mind (or spirit) and body – one that is at odds with a genuinely Latter-day Saint perspective (Brown & Holbrook, 2015).

In contrast to the dualism found in most secular liturgies, wherein the body and its processes are explained primarily in mechanical and deterministic terms and the mind is held to be the internal, immaterial region of freewill where the mysterious processes of choice occur, Latter-day Saint thought is marked by its commitment to a form of holism in which body and spirit are understood to be “entangled . . . interconnected, enmeshed, interdependent” (Brown & Holbrook, 2015, p. 292; see also Givens, 2015;

Webb, 2013).⁵ Indeed, as Brown and Holbrook (2015) point out:

The concept of embodiment as entanglement is a constant in LDS beliefs and practices relating to the body. . . . Mormons have since the beginning believed that the entanglement of premortal spirit with mortal body is sacred and central to the meaning of life. Our identities and our bodies metamorphose as we progress from fetus (a life largely hoped-for and only tenuously physical) to infancy through childhood and adolescence, then into adulthood, maturity, and finally advanced age (a life largely remembered and only tenuously physical). With each transition, spirit remains entangled with body, and this entanglement for early Mormons was physical rather than only metaphysical. (pp. 293-295)

Similarly, Hartley (2019) notes:

The basic consensus in Mormonism, then, is that the mind/spirit and the body are not two totally separate things and that they are interrelated. So, things that we feel and think in our spirit can have physiological reactions and changes in the body because they are connected. James E. Talmage wrote: “It is peculiar to the theology of the Latter-day Saints that we regard the body as an essential part of the soul . . . Nowhere, outside the Church of Jesus Christ, is the solemn and eternal truth taught that the soul of man is the body and the spirit combined.” It is a unique philosophical answer: I have a body and a spirit. Both are essential to make up my soul. Both are substance. Both affect the other. (p. 158)

In a nutshell, then, moral agency is not some free-floating power or capacity to make choices independent of or uninfluenced by things in the physical world such as our own mortal, physical bodies. Rather, moral agency is always *embodied moral agency* insofar as meaningful, purposive agentic action always takes place in the context of the biological realities and constraints of our physical embodiment, never independent of it. Further, because the body is neither some Platonic cage imprisoning the spirit, nor the mechanical determinant of psychological phenomena, as so often portrayed in secular liturgies, our thoughts, feelings, and desires (sexual or otherwise) are never

5. Or, as LDS scholar Terryl Givens (2015) has argued, a two-tiered monism – a form of monism in which both spirit and matter are held to be material, but there is a distinction to be made in terms of refinement or purity.

adequately reducible to the causal functions of impersonal meat and chemical, but must always be seen as events occurring in a fundamentally moral, physiological, interpersonal, and spiritual context. Taking up this distinctly LDS perspective on embodiment, agency, and sexuality where appropriate in therapy, then, LDS therapists can do much to help clients understand that their sexual desires are not things that happen to them, the product of some fixed biological condition, but are instead intensely holistic embodied events that are intrinsically agentic, and, thus, inherently purposive, moral, and meaningful. Therapy, from this perspective, would afford an opportunity to explore the specific purpose and meaning – particularly the divinely appointed purpose and interpersonal meaning – of specific acts of sexual desiring.

HEDONISM

A final source of struggle and doubt for many members of the Church trying to make sense of their religious commitments and belief is hedonism. It is difficult to overstate the pervasive influence that the concept of hedonism exerts in our modern world, and on the way we in the Church understand ourselves and the gospel of Christ. Hedonism is, simply put, the notion that the pursuit of pleasure (however it may be individually defined) is the primary and most important goal of life (Wooten, 2018). Of course, there are many versions of hedonism at work in the world (see Fieldman, 2004 for a detailed analysis). Some are quite unapologetically and forthrightly selfish and self-aggrandizing, while others are more civil in nature, seeking to secure personal benefit through cooperation and mutual cost-sharing. We suspect we are on safe ground assuming that most Latter-day Saints would be repulsed by the former and more comfortable with the latter, more approving of Bill Gates, for example, than Hugh Hefner.

What is sometimes missed, however, is the profound role the secular premise of hedonism (typically unacknowledged and unrecognized) can play in shaping and guiding many Church members' spiritual lives and religious understandings. For example, many Church members report that a primary reason why they obey heavenly commandments and follow prophetic teachings is in order to secure for themselves

certain desired blessings (or reach a certain heavenly destination), the personal benefits that come from paying the divinely dictated price of discipleship. All too often our ordinary conversations about the Word of Wisdom or the Law of Tithing, for example, center on the specific goods (i.e., blessings) that are presumed to derive from following these commandments – i.e., longer life, needed financial windfalls, and so on. Obedience to God, in such a view, is the instrumental means by which one obtains for oneself certain items, experiences, or benefits one personally desires (for various reasons). The possibility that one might wish to obey God and follow prophetic counsel simply because doing so is good in itself and serves no other end or purpose, reflecting only love and self-forgetting or self-transcendence, is a possibility seldom explicitly entertained or articulated. Most often, personal desire for benefit to self is taken to always come first as motivation, framing the meaning of any particular acts of obedience and providing the only reasonable justification for inconveniencing oneself in the service of God and one's neighbor.

The ultimate consequence of this line of thinking, though seldom noted, is that clients come to see their relationship with our Father in Heaven and with Jesus Christ primarily in terms of using individual means to meet individual ends. The nature of such a relationship is at root an economic or contractual one, rather than a familial or covenantal one. It is a relationship whose primary concern is the equitable exchange of desired goods and services by separate parties with separate – though perhaps converging – interests (Fowers, 2010). In the end, hedonism casts the nature of all relationships as essentially economic relationships, and renders the meaning of all relationships in terms of the self-interested exchange of goods and services.

For example, imagine a client struggling with depression, addiction, marital problems, unwanted same-sex attraction, or any of a host of other psychological and spiritual problems. Having absorbed the precepts of hedonism from their immersion in our larger, secular culture (however unconsciously or innocently), and, thus, assuming that their relationship with God is fundamentally economic or transactional in nature, the client may end up asking questions such as: "I'm keeping the commandments, attending church, going to therapy, serving others, and everything else I'm

supposed to do, so why am I still depressed? Why hasn't God taken away my addiction? Why won't God take these unwanted sexual desires away? Why are my spouse and I still fighting? Where are the blessings I was promised?" Because their covenant relationship with God has been framed in the terms of contractual exchanges and fulfillments, grievances can begin to mount when the blessings clients have come to expect in return for their obedience do not show up. The all-too-predictable result, then, is that clients are left wondering why, in the midst of unmerited suffering and setback, God is not keeping His end of the agreed-upon bargain.

Viewing one's life and relationship with God through the lens of hedonism, especially in the face of unexpected struggles, unrelenting heartbreak, or unmerited pain and suffering, can easily lead to feelings of having been betrayed or cheated by God. They have, after all, gone to great lengths and made great sacrifices to secure the blessings they desire, but God is withholding those blessings – and, it may appear to them that He is doing so for no good or justifiable reason. Operating from hedonistic premises, it becomes remarkably easy to believe that God is untrustworthy, arbitrary, or malicious when life does not go as we have always thought it would, when God does not act in the way we expect Him to act in light of our hedonistic assumptions about who He is and how relationships with Him work. It is easy to begin to believe that God is not actually a loving God at all, not a God who wants His children to be happy, but rather someone who demands obedience and sacrifice but does not necessarily keep His promises to give back in return. After all, the client might feel, if God truly is a loving God, then He would not allow, or would take away, unjust suffering, especially when the one suffering has clearly earned respite from suffering by having dutifully obeyed God's commandments. Such a God, the client may ultimately decide, is not really worthy of being worshipped and obeyed, and any Church that preaches such a God cannot possibly be a true and living one.

Fortunately, there other premises from which clients might understand the nature of divine commandments, prophetic counsel, and the possibilities of genuine relationship with our Heavenly Father and His

Son, Jesus Christ. It is possible to "think differently" in light of the Restored Gospel. There are ways in which faithful Latter-day Saint therapists can serve their clients as they struggle with their unbelief and try to make sense of their faith and their experience of suffering, tragedy, loss – what has been variously termed "the dark nights of the soul" (Moore, 2004) and the "silence of God" (Thielicke, 2010).

While space does not permit a full exploration of the topic, one possible avenue to be explored is one in which the fundamentality of moral agency is merged with the reality of the "pure love of Christ" (i.e., Charity), or what has long been known in the Christian tradition as *Agapé*. In contrast to the secular assumption of hedonism, in which striving for the gratification of self is taken simply to be inescapable human nature, and, thus, the foundation of all relationships, Latter-day Saint therapists might encourage their clients to consider that as moral agents they are capable of forgoing instrumental reasoning and self-interest. Embodied moral agents are intrinsically capable of doing and being otherwise, and, thus, of acting in ways that transcend matters of self-regard and the means-ends relational calculus of hedonism. Granted, as moral agents, our clients can certainly give themselves over to the possibilities of self-regard, take up the invitation to seek the maximization of personal benefit, or yield to the desire for control in their relationships with others and God. However, as moral agents, they can also yield to the "enticings of the Holy Spirit" that call each of us to the possibilities of the pure love of Christ and the freedom of self-forgetting and self-transcendence. From the alternative perspective we are offering here, a perspective grounded in the teachings of scripture rather than in secular liturgies, it is clear that moral agency is our nature, and it is so in a way that hedonism is not.

By helping our clients come to understand themselves as fundamentally moral agents, we can help them to see how it is possible to understand that the commandments of a loving Heavenly Father, and the compassionate and wise counsel of anointed priesthood leaders, are not instrumental means by which they secure for themselves the satisfaction of their individual desires. Rather, divine law is an invitation to live as our Father in Heaven lives, to be in the world

as He is, and understand ourselves and others as He does. Thus, divine commandments are in fact themselves heavenly blessings, and genuine obedience is at its root an act of loving thanksgiving for the blessing of commandments, an act of gratitude for the invitation to be “at one” with the Father and the guidance for how to be so. As such, obedience constitutes a recognition of one’s dependence on and adoration of a compassionate, caring Father in Heaven who seeks always and in all ways to comfort and bless and ennoble His children. “And they shall also be crowned with blessings from above,” the Lord promises us in scripture, “yea, with commandments not a few” (D & C 59:4) – a promise immediately followed by a list of commandments/blessings our Father wishes to bestow on us to make our lives fuller, safer, and more meaningful and joyful.

Seen in this light, then, concern for the calculus of personal cost and benefit that may have been subtly inscribed on our clients’ hearts through the formative processes of secular liturgies loses its persuasive power over their religious imagination and spiritual understanding. Trials and suffering and painful setbacks will come, they can begin to see, but not because God has not been keeping His end of the “obedience bargain” with them. Rather, tragedy comes because that is the nature of life in a world such as this, a world jam-packed with other moral agents working out their relationships with one another and with God – sometimes doing it well and bringing much joy, and sometimes doing it poorly and bringing much misery in their wake. Reasoning from the premises of moral agency and charity, rather than inescapable and normative hedonism, one’s perspective on justice changes dramatically as it becomes clear that it is only mercy that can make sense of a world of injustice. Only in light of unearned mercy can unearned injustice be made, if only in some small measure, intelligible. In Christ’s merciful love for each of us in the midst of the supreme injustice of His suffering for and because of us, in Gethsemane and again on the Cross, we find an alternative image of humanity and human possibility – and image in stark contrast to the secular assumptions of the hedonic basis of human nature. As Arthur Henry King (1998) incisively noted, “Christ in his incarnation as man shows the possibilities of the human” (p. 17).

In Christ, we discover that commandments are gifts freely and lovingly given, not instruments to be used in the furtherance of individual aims and ends. And, though injustice will come into every life and pain will follow, we are never alone, even in the deepest anguish of our own Gethsemanes. “Lord, I resented your silence,” Father Rodrigues confesses in Shusaku Endo’s novel *Silence*. “I was not silent,” God responds, “I suffered beside you.” In Christ, the demands for fair exchange are swallowed up in the promise of mercy, compassion, communion, and a peace that speaks soul to soul. The test set before us in this life, I believe, is not whether we will maximize our blessings by dutiful obedience to divine laws, or whether we will ensure our place in heaven by compiling a spotless record of compliance. Rather, we believe, the test set before us all in this life is to learn what it means to be moral agents, beings who can love and must allow themselves to be loved. In so doing, we are able to give ourselves on the altar in sacrificial similitude of the infinite and eternal sacrifice of the Son of God (Alma 34:14). No negotiation is needed, no contract is necessary, only yielding and submission to the loving will of God is required, submission as pure love unburdened by the quest for personal benefit or calculations of the relative costs and benefits of discipleship.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, the questions and doubts that generate so many crises of faith for so many of our clients must be met by Latter-day Saint therapists by more sustained and careful reflection on the premises from which our clients’ questions and doubts and struggles to believe actually spring. However, in order for such reflection to do more than just recapitulate tried and tired assumptions and categories of thought, we as Latter-day Saint psychologists and mental health professionals must open ourselves up to alternate starting points and the different ways of thinking such alternatives entail. Perhaps, in so doing, we may at last come to see what the real, most fundamental difference is between secular starting points and sacred ones. Perhaps, if we are sufficiently open to divine instruction as well as critical reflection, we will come to see that Christ is, always has been, and always must be, our one true foundational premise.

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

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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 are 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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Naturalism, Theism, and the Risks of Professional Values Imposition in Psychotherapy with Theistic Clients

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The codes of ethics guiding the work of counselors and psychotherapists state that ethical practitioners pursue training in areas where they are at risk of imposing values. While training in the potential imposition of personal values is pervasive, training in the potential imposition of professional values is rare. Naturalism, the guiding worldview of science and psychology excludes theism, which is the guiding worldview of many people. Consequently, naturalism is a professional value that may be imposed on theistic clients in psychotherapy. The exclusion of theism from psychology and psychotherapy along with the naturalization of theistic experiences and concepts and the omission of theism from theistic theories that are imported into psychotherapy demonstrate how great the risk of imposing the professional value of naturalism in psychotherapy is. In light of that risk and given the lack of training in this area of need, several forms of theism that fall on a continuum from weak to strong theism are briefly reviewed as an initial step in educating counselors and psychotherapists about this important aspect of many clients. Also, to encourage careful and critical reflection, some of the challenges that accompany the common ways in which counselors and psychotherapists might include theism in their therapy is provided. Specific points of emphasis for therapists who are members of the church and work with theistic clients who are members of the church are addressed in the conclusion.

The American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2014) states that ethical counselors and psychotherapists, “seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients, especially when the counselor’s values are inconsistent with the client’s goals or are discriminatory in nature” (section A.4.b.; see APA, 2017, Principle E, for a similar statement). Generally speaking, counselor values come in two forms: personal values and professional values (Packard, 2009). Personal values typically stem from the therapist’s upbringing, culture, and personal experiences and can include things like religious beliefs, political leanings, and gender role expectations.

Professional values stem from the disciplines and institutions within which the therapist has been educated and trained and can include things like ontological assumptions (e.g., individualism), epistemological preferences (e.g., empiricism), and ethical positions (e.g., utilitarianism). In both cases, the values may be explicitly adopted, but they can also just as often be implicitly held (Jackson, Hansen, & Cook-Ly, 2013).

Training in the risk of personal value imposition in domains such as race, ethnicity, culture, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, religion, and ability is abundantly available,

both in degree programs in which counselors and psychotherapists are initially trained and in continuing education classes that are offered across the country and at annual conventions of the ACA and APA. Training in the risk of professional value imposition is scarcer, in part because values stemming from the counselor's or psychotherapist's discipline and institution are often hidden (Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005). Consequently, professional values receive less attention in the literature and in training and education than personal values. Nevertheless, professional values constitute an important area in which the risk of value imposition exists. Increasingly, psychologists have uncovered forms of institutional and disciplinary bias in course and degree program curricula and materials (e.g., Peterson & Kroner, 2006), research studies (e.g., Roberts, Bareket-Shavit, Dollins, Goldie, & Mortenson, 2020), graduate education (Diggles, 2014), and more. Indigenous psychologists also point to cultural biases in psychology's professional values concerning research design, instrumentation, and analysis, including within the scientific method itself (e.g., Sundararajan, 2019).

Is it possible that counselors and psychotherapists, given the training and education they have received in psychological theory, method, and practice, may be at risk of imposing professional values on their clients? An increasing number of psychotherapists believe it is possible and call for increased training and education for counselors and psychotherapists to address this ethical concern (Slife, 2011; Tjeltveit, 2004). One professional value central to psychological science and practice, and which has been critically examined as to its risk of biasing the discipline and institution of psychology in a number of significant ways, is naturalism (Armstrong, 2011; Slife & Reber, 2009; Bishop, 2007). This paper extends that critical examination to include counselors and psychotherapists, who might be at risk of imposing the professional value of naturalism on their clients, especially clients of faith. The professional value of naturalism will be described, its impact and imposition within the discipline of psychology will be reviewed, and the extension of those same forms of imposition to counseling and psychotherapy will be explicated. Then, given that ethical counselors and psychotherapists "seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto

clients" (ACA, 2014, Sect. A.4.b), some preliminary education and training in the theistic worldview that is held by many clients of faith will be provided.

THE PROFESSIONAL VALUE OF NATURALISM

The worldview of naturalism, which the historian of psychology, Thomas Leahey (2013) describes as "the central dogma of science" (p. 379) has been adopted by the discipline of psychology and by the institution of science (Plantinga, 2011). Naturalism is the idea that all events are explainable in terms of natural laws and processes. Naturalism has been historically divided into two components or aspects: ontological and methodological (Bishop, 2007). In its ontological form, naturalism is concerned with the question of what is real. For the ontological naturalist, the real is what is material, tangible, and operates according to natural laws. What is not real, for the ontological naturalist, is all that lies outside of this definition of the natural, or what is often referred to as the supernatural. Regarding the supernatural and ontological naturalism's treatment of it, Decaro and MacArthur (2010) state that ontological naturalism cannot "countenance the supernatural, whether in the form of entities (such as God, spirits, entelechies, or Cartesian minds), events (such as miracles or magic), or epistemic faculties (such as mystical insight or spiritual intuition" (p. 3). For the ontological naturalist, such things simply are not considered to be real and therefore have no place in scientific explanation.

Recognizing the potential for value imposition in such a strong ontological position, a number of scientists and psychologists endorse instead the methodological or scientific form of naturalism. Methodological or scientific naturalism claims not to weigh in on the reality of things, like those just described, but instead confines itself only "to the search for natural causes to explain natural phenomena" (Jones, 2005, sect. 4, para. 2). The methodological naturalist believes that the scientific method is the best way to investigate reality and can be applied without weighing in on what that reality is (Bishop, 2007). Thus, methodological naturalists do not explicitly deny non- or super-natural realities, but only exclude explanations invoking such realities from their study.

As Jones (2005) put it most frankly, “while supernatural explanations may be important and have merit, they are not part of science” (sect. 4, para. 2).

A number of philosophers of science have strongly argued that this methodological approach, in which God and “supernatural” things are bracketed rather than ontologically denied, creates a slippery slope in which methodological naturalism inevitably slides into ontological naturalism (e.g., Gantt & Williams, 2020; Zargar, Azadegan, & Nabavi, 2019). Schafersman (1997), for example, has examined the slipperiness of the slope on which these two forms of naturalism are located and concludes that “the practice or adoption of methodological naturalism entails a logical and moral belief in ontological naturalism, so they are not logically decoupled” (sect. Methodological and Ontological Naturalism, para. 11). In a similar vein, Forrest (2000) notes that whether its practitioners intend for it to do so or not:

methodological naturalism has consistently chipped away at the plausibility of the existential claims made by supernaturalism by providing increasingly successful explanations of aspects of the world which religion has historically sought to explain, e.g., human origins. The threat faced by supernaturalism is not the threat of logical disproof, but the fact of having its explanations supplanted by scientific ones” (sect. Philosophical Naturalism’s Ontological Categories, para. 7).

Whether in its metaphysical or methodological form, then, naturalism has inescapable implications for the viability of any non-naturalistic worldviews.

An illustration of this slippery slope in action may be useful at this juncture. In 2007, the American Psychological Association Council of Representatives issued a *Resolution on Religious, Religion-Based and/or Religion-Derived Prejudice*. In that resolution the council makes a statement that is consistent with psychology’s methodological naturalism, which is that “psychology has no legitimate function in arbitrating matters of faith and theology” (para. 5). Thus, with regard to the truth claims of religions, including theistic religions, psychology is to exclude such ontological matters from its science and not judge their veracity. Such things, on this methodological naturalistic account, simply lie outside the purview of the discipline of scientific psychology.

Despite this resolution and methodological naturalism’s ostensible neutrality with regard to the ontological claims of religion, only a few years after it was published, one of the best known psychologists in the United States, a specialist on prejudice, bias, and morality, Jonathan Haidt, gave a presentation to a group of scientists titled, *Enlightenment 2.0 Requires Morality 2.0*, in which he began his talk with the following items on a PowerPoint slide: “Broad scientific consensus: 1) A world with gods should be measurably different. 2) We can’t be certain that no supernatural entities exist, but . . . 3) Our world does not look like a world with gods. 4) Historical, cosmological, & causal claims of religions mostly false. 5) Religion is a natural phenomenon; it can and should be studied with methods of science.” After Haidt quickly reviewed the items on the list, none with a single citation or shred of evidence offered as support, he summarized his argument by stating that “the factual claims of religion are by and large, if not altogether, false.” He then asked for agreement with his argument and seeing what appeared to be all the hands in the audience go up, he moved on with his talk, noting that anyone who did disagree with any item on the list could see him afterward at lunch, ostensibly to be put straight on their error.

Were this the only example of this slippery slope in psychology, it would not be worth mentioning, but a systematic review of the most popular psychology research methods texts used to teach psychologists how to conduct their studies shows that the slip from methodological to metaphysical naturalism is common, though rarely acknowledged (Reber, 2018). Thus, psychological naturalism, which states that human behavior and mental states “must be explained in terms that are compatible with the broader physicalistic view of nature provided by the natural sciences” (Stich, 1992, p. 246; also Fils, 2019), inevitably slips into a metaphysical/ontological naturalism that arbitrates matters of faith and theology and results in an pervasive implicit bias in the discipline (see Gantt, 2018; Gantt & Williams, 2020; Slife & Reber, 2009).

PSYCHOLOGY’S IMPOSITION OF NATURALISM

Theism, like naturalism, is a worldview. Indeed, it is considered the other major worldview of Western

civilization (Smith, 2001). Unlike naturalism, theism assumes “that a God (or Gods) is actively and currently engaged with and makes a meaningful difference in the practical world” (Reber & Slife, 2013a, p. 6; see also Barbour, 1997 and Plantinga, 2011). On an ontological level, then, theism assumes that divine “present, ongoing, and difference-making activity” (ibid) is real. Methodologically, theism asserts that this divine activity can and should be included in a study of the world, including a scientific study of the psychological world (Reber, Slife, & Downs, 2012). In this sense, theism stands in direct and clear contrast with the naturalistic worldview, which, given the slippery slope already described, both denies and excludes God’s engagement in the world. Psychology, as a naturalistic science, then, is at risk of an implicit anti-theistic disciplinary prejudice, which could result in professional value imposition, both within the discipline of psychology and within psychotherapy and counseling specifically. I will review the evidence of this value imposition in psychology and psychotherapy below.

PSYCHOLOGY’S EXCLUSION OF THEISM

One of the obvious examples of the imposition of the value of naturalism within the discipline of psychology is what Maier (2004) labels “God’s exile from psychology” (p. 323). Maier has carefully examined the history of American psychology and he identifies a clear shift from its founding, in which psychology was described by G. Stanley Hall in 1885 as “Christian to its root and center” (cited in Slife & Reber, 2009, p. 70), to becoming within almost a single generation, almost completely secularized. He attributes this abrupt shift to a change in education. Maier finds that while the chief founders of psychology, James McCosh, G. Stanley Hall, and William James, among others, were theists who saw education and training in psychology as a necessary blend of theology and scientific courses, their students compartmentalized their theistic beliefs, stopped taking theology courses, and in true methodological naturalist fashion, banished theism from the psychology classroom and laboratory to the domain of the church.

This approach, in which God and God’s activity are compartmentalized and exiled, remains a key feature of the discipline, even in fields of psychology that

study religion and spirituality. Indeed, the flagship APA journal whose primary focus is on such matters (*Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*) explicitly prohibits the publication of any articles that take a theistic approach. The founding editor of the journal stated in his introduction to the first edition of the journal that “papers that aim to use theological constructs as explanatory variables in psychological models are . . . inappropriate” (Piedmont, 2008, p. 1). The succeeding editor added her support, stating, “I feel strongly that as a science, psychology should not and cannot admit into its domain non-empirical approaches such as theistic psychology” (Park, 2017, p. 72). Aside from the false claim that theistic approaches are non-empirical (see Reber, Slife, and Downs, 2012), both editors cite no justification for their exclusion. Given psychology’s resolution discussed above, one can safely assume that the editors would justify their exclusion of theism on the grounds of methodological naturalism, though as we have shown, a methodological exclusion of theism is not methodologically necessary or warranted (ibid). More likely, given the slippery slope previously discussed, these editors have implicit ontological commitments that lead them to arbitrate matters of faith and theism, despite the APA (2007) resolution that prohibits psychologists from doing so.

In any case, just over one hundred years after its founding, psychology overwhelmingly excludes God’s activity from its education, research, and publications. Consequently, a student in an introductory psychology class might find a few references to religion in their textbook, but they would likely find no mention of God or God’s activity at all (Slife & Reber, 2009). Students in research methods courses might find faith and God’s activity cursorily mentioned in their textbooks, but usually only as an example of an alternative epistemology to empirical science that is deemed inappropriate to psychological investigation despite the absence of evidence or the presence of a justification (Reber, 2018).

PSYCHOLOGY’S OPERATIONALIZATION/ TRANSFORMATION OF THEISM

Psychology’s exclusion of God and God’s activity from psychological research, textbooks, and journals limits any study of religious and spiritual phenomena

and experiences to naturalistic constructs, variables, and psychological models (Piedmont, 2008). The result of this naturalistic restriction is that theistic religious and spiritual phenomena and experiences are either excluded from psychological research or have to be operationalized and transformed into naturalistic phenomena and experiences, even when they center on God and God's activity (see Gantt & Williams, 2020; Slife & Reber, 2012; Reber, 2006).

Research on people's image of God, for example, cannot include an examination of participants' experiences of God as a potential factor that could contribute to the development of their image of God even when the explicit focus of the study is the participants' "relationship to God" (Cassibba, et al., 2008, p. 1755). This is not because those experiences cannot be gathered and examined just as readily as any other experiences people have had and could describe to a researcher, but only because the use of "theological constructs as explanatory variables in psychological models" (Piedmont, 2008, p. 1) has been deemed, without reason or justification, to be "inappropriate" (ibid; Park, 2017). The curious result of this restriction to only naturalistic variables and explanations is that the researchers replace theists' experiences of God with naturalistic "proxy" variables, like frequency of church attendance, prayer, and other measures of "religiosity". This is like trying to understand a person's relationship with his or her marriage partner by counting how many times he or she eats dinner together with his or her spouse each week instead of asking the person about his or her experiences and relationship with his or her spouse directly.

Reviews of the psychological research on religious and spiritual experiences and phenomena, including God image, relationship with God, and faith (Reber, Slife, & Downs, 2012), and also miracles (Reber & Slife, 2013a), conversion and forgiveness (Slife, Reber, & Lefevor, 2012), and prayer and meditation (Slife & Reber, 2012), shows that the operationalization and transformation of these experiences and concepts into naturalistic proxy variables is almost universal. So too is the absence of a single theistic interpretation of the findings on any of these topics, even though for theists, including the theistic participants in the studies, these topics necessarily include an active, difference-making God. Nevertheless, the transformation of

theistic factors and theistic interpretations into naturalistic factors and interpretations took place in every study reviewed, even though theistic experiences, constructs, and interpretations are as available and are as empirically viable as naturalistic constructs and interpretations (Reber & Slife, 2013b). Moreover, the data gathered from a theistic approach to psychological research, as has been demonstrated in previous research (e.g., Reber, Slife, & Downs, 2012), are just as capable of quantitative and qualitative analysis and can produce tests of hypotheses, results, and theistic interpretations that are interesting, informative, and compelling, while also according with the experiences and interpretations of the people studied. Thus, it is not empiricism in general, or the scientific method specifically, that compels these naturalistic operationalizations, transformations, and interpretations, but rather the assumption of naturalism that pervades the discipline as an implicit anti-theistic bias (Slife & Reber, 2013b).

PSYCHOLOGY'S OMISSION OF THEISM FROM THEISTIC THEORIES

Given the pervasive exile of God and divine activity from psychology and in light of what we might refer to as the naturalization of theistic theories, experiences, concepts, and interpretations in psychological research, it should come as no surprise that the importation of theistic theories into psychology results in that theism being stripped away. If not surprising, the omission is still glaring, especially when the theory's author is explicitly theistic and theism is clearly essential to their theory. Butera (2010), for example, claims that even the theism of Saint Thomas Aquinas, which is foundational to all of his thinking and is the primary focus of his work, is not necessary to a psychology based on Aquinas's ideas. Aquinas's psychology, Butera asserts is "philosophical," not "theological," even though Aquinas was first and last a theologian, because the psychology he developed is able to stand on its own, independent of his theological commitments (p. 348).

Aside from the indelible alteration of Aquinas's ideas that would ensue from the removal of the foundational assumption of theism from those ideas, why does Butera deem it necessary for Aquinas's

psychology to stand on its own, independent of theological commitments? Do naturalistic theories need to stand alone independent of their naturalistic commitments? No, only theistic theories need their theism removed as they are imported into psychology so the theory can fit within the naturalistic worldview that psychology embraces. But can the theory even be ascribed to Aquinas after such a drastic omission?

The same questions arise with the importation of Martin Buber's theistic philosophy into humanistic psychology (Slife & Reber, 2009). Martin Buber stated that:

If I myself should designate something as the 'central portion of my life work,' then it could not be anything individual, but only the one basic insight. . . that the I-Thou relation to God and the I-Thou relation to one's fellow man are at bottom related to each other" (cited in Friedman, 1988, p. 429).

Carl Rogers, who drew from Martin Buber's philosophy in his understanding of relationships in the development of his person-centered psychology, left Buber's foundational theistic principle out of that psychology. As Friedman (1994), the world's foremost expert on Buber's thinking described it, "Rogers clearly accepted Buber's I-Thou relationship and made it his own without plumbing the depth of the philosophical anthropologies...that Buber judges to be its necessary underpinnings" (p 46-65).

A similarly glaring omission of theism from an explicitly theistic philosophy can be found in the importation of Soren Kierkegaard's existential philosophy into existential psychology. Speaking of his life's work, Kierkegaard stated:

What I have wanted and want to achieve through my work, what I also regard as the most important, is first of all to make clear what is involved in being a Christian, to present the picture of a Christian in all its ideal, that is, true form, worked out to every true limit, submitting myself even before any other to be judged by this picture, whatever the judgement is . . ." (Kierkegaard, 1859/1998, p. 129).

Even a cursory reading of Kierkegaard's works demonstrates clearly that for him being a Christian rests upon a theistic foundation. This is confirmed by those with expertise in Kierkegaard's philosophy. Westphal (2015), for example, notes that Kierkegaard's theism is unmistakable and is central to his work, stating

that, "the self's relation to the Other, in Kierkegaard, is mediated by God. Furthermore, God is the Thou who addresses me and who gives me an identity and vocation of which I am not the origin" (para. 1). Despite the many clear statements and even warnings about the necessity of Kierkegaard's theism to his ideas, psychologists assert, without justification or explanation, that Kierkegaard's theism can be left out, even as his philosophy is used to develop theory and conduct research. Rusak (2017) argues, for example, that "one can accept Kierkegaard's use of religious archetypes in crafting a psychical metaphysics, irrespective of whether one forthrightly believes in Christian doctrine's actuality or not" (para. 15). Lippitt (2016) notes that psychology has largely secularized Kierkegaard's work and even recalls a colleague stating that, "Kierkegaard is a source of great insight provided 'we ignore the religious stuff'" (p. 23).

The fact that these and other psychologists who use Kierkegaard's philosophy, but remove its theistic elements, acknowledge that they are doing so speaks to their awareness that Kierkegaard was a theist and that his work assumed theism. However, as with Butera and Rogers, they provide no justification for their omission, no evidence that leaving Kierkegaard's theism in the theory would be a problem, and they in no way account for the significant changes to the theory that result from the removal of its theistic foundation once it is imported into psychology. The justification, it would seem, is implicitly provided by the professional value of naturalism, which requires that theism be omitted, even without testing whether and to what extent the theory is capable of having a positive impact on psychological theory, research, and practice with its central theism left in. Like exclusion and transformation, the omission of theism from theistic theories, justified only by psychologist's adoption of naturalism rather than by critical, empirical, or any other form of evaluation, is a form of disciplinary discrimination against the theistic worldview.

PSYCHOTHERAPISTS' RISK OF IMPOSING NATURALISM ON CLIENTS

To what extent might psychotherapy and counseling, which in many ways can be understood as the practice arm of psychological theorizing and research,

be susceptible to these same forms of disciplinary and institutional anti-theistic bias and discrimination? To examine this question, it may be helpful to first acknowledge that in the case of counseling and psychotherapy, there is an added level of complexity at play. As mentioned in the introduction, therapists and counselors must abide by their ethics codes and are expected to receive regular training and education in the risks of imposing their values on clients. Counselors and therapists have received a great deal of training in the risks of imposing their personal values on their clients, including personal religious values. Perhaps, they have been trained using a vignette like this one, which demonstrates potentially damaging ways in which a therapist's personal religious values can be imposed on a client:

A Christian therapist is working with an atheist client who is suffering from a terminal illness. The therapist is concerned about the client's salvation and sees this as a more important issue than their psychological health at this point of therapy. They seek consultation from a colleague who says, "At this point, you must follow God's will, not your ethics code." The therapist goes into the next session and shares about their faith, encouraging the client to accept Jesus as their savior (Hoffman, 2008, p. 23).

Having been well-trained to recognize such behavior as a clear violation of the ethics code and desiring to avoid even the slightest hint of personal value imposition, it is possible that many therapists steer clear of religion, spirituality, and faith altogether in working with their clients (Hathaway, Scott, & Garver, 2004). What they may not realize, however, is how their efforts to avoid the imposition of personal religious values might inadvertently contribute to professional value imposition, especially when training in the risks of the professional value imposition of naturalism in psychotherapy is rare. Consequently, therapists who avoid spiritual and religious issues in an attempt to steer clear of personal religious value imposition may not appreciate the degree to which they might exclude theism, naturalize theistic experiences and interpretations, and/or omit theism from theistic theories, in their work with their clients.

PSYCHOTHERAPISTS' RISK OF EXCLUDING THEISM

Is it possible that some counselors and psychotherapists, in an effort to avoid personal religious value

imposition, exile God and God's activity from their therapy offices? And, if they do keep their own and their clients' beliefs about religion and faith outside the door, what are the implications of that exclusion of God and God's activity for clients of faith who often want their religious and spiritual beliefs and experiences to be part of therapy (Rose, Westefeld, & Ansely, 2001). Holmberg, Jensen, and Vetere (2020) addressed these questions in a mixed-method study of family therapists and their clients. They found that the clients in their sample overwhelmingly wanted there to be "room to speak" (p. 7) about spiritual matters in therapy. They wanted to be "met and acknowledged" as a whole person, which included the spiritual and religious dimension of life" (p. 8). And they "described leaning on God in their crises, and felt that God could be included in their therapy, both as a contributor and as a relationship" (ibid).

Holmberg, Jensen, and Ulland (2017) note how these same therapy clients, whose beliefs and experiences are inherent to their identity and their understanding of their psychological issues and struggles, find a therapist's unwillingness to include religion and spirituality in their work frustrating and unproductive. A research participant named "Julia" demonstrates this frustration well, noting that when she brought up what she describes as the "room" of her spirituality to her therapist, he would not enter the "room" and instead closed the door. The study authors quote directly from the interview transcript to capture Julia's experience and frustration with the therapist's exclusion of her spiritual "room".

Julia: The therapist did not understand. He said, 'So what?', and for me it was very strange. I felt that he couldn't understand my Christian background, that even such a cruel man [her husband] is hard to leave, because it's wrong in a way . . . And I felt, it was something about our connection, because this 'room' is so big in my life, and with the therapist, I needed to close the door. I could talk about everything else, there were thousands of things, but I felt it wasn't fruitful to continue.

Interviewer: And this 'room' is, as you say, quite big?

Julia: For me it is very big, yes, it infiltrates everything; it infiltrates who I am as a person, and . . . I just felt that a door was closed, yes; he did not understand me at all. I felt I was a problem (p. 16).

The study authors conclude that, “the therapist in this case was unable to enter the client’s spiritual world; he really did not understand her frustrations” (Holmberg, Jensen, & Ulland, 2017, p. 16). By excluding the client’s “room”, the therapist may believe he or she successfully avoided imposing any religious or spiritual values on the client. However, this is not the case, because the therapist’s exclusion of God and God’s activity is itself an imposition, one that is reinforced by the professional value of naturalism. By refusing to open the door to the room of Julia’s spiritual world, a room that she states “infiltrates everything; it infiltrates who I am as a person” (ibid), the therapist imposed an exclusionary professional value on the client and the client discontinued therapy as a result.

Another research participant (“Betty”), laments that after nearly three decades of working with multiple therapists on her marriage that any attempt by her to raise religious and spiritual issues in therapy were not taken up by any of the therapists. She recalls one couple’s session in which she got up the courage to share with the therapist that her and her husband’s:

spiritual life was difficult. She said a few sentences and then stopped. Her husband replied that he did not agree, and trivialized her raising of the issue. The therapist did not follow up, and the dialogue about the topic ceased. The therapist did not raise the issue in the succeeding sessions (Holmberg, Jensen, & Ulland, 2017, p. 16).

In addition to feeling like her efforts to bring religion and spirituality into therapy went nowhere, Betty expressed frustration that the therapists never attempted to bring these things up in therapy themselves. She told her interviewer:

I believe it really is about time. I have been ready for years. I think it is completely strange that questions haven’t been raised before, not a single question for 27 years; what does your faith mean within this context? (ibid).

In summarizing the outcome of Betty’s three decade failure to have religion and spirituality included in therapy, the authors state that, “the couple’s therapists had never introduced the topic of their spiritual world during the sessions and Betty felt she had become resigned to the situation” (Holmberg, Jensen, & Ullande, 2017, p. 16).

It may be that Betty and Julia coincidentally encountered therapists who have the personal value that matters of God and God’s activity are to be kept out of therapy, but Holmberg, Jensen, & Vetere’s (2020) interviews of the psychotherapists suggest a more professional values-based norm toward this practice of exclusion:

It is of concern to us that some said if they talked to clients about this topic they would keep this secret, as they were afraid to become unpopular in the therapeutic establishment. One therapist said: ‘If you want to stay within the most recognised therapeutic environments, those who have the greatest authority, my feeling is that they do not talk much about this’ (T1, 1, 40-42). Some therapists had tried talking with other colleagues, but felt rejected and almost ignored. . . In this study, therapists found it easier to raise and respond to secular spirituality: values and meaning not connected to religion. Both clients and therapists found that religious perspectives were more marginalised (p. 12).

PSYCHOTHERAPISTS’ RISK OF TRANSFORMING THEISM

Along with exclusion as a potential professional value imposition, might some counselors and therapists be at risk of imposing naturalism on their theistic clients by altering, re-framing, or explaining away their clients’ theistic experiences, concepts, and understandings? One therapist’s account of an event in his training as a clinical psychologist anecdotally suggests this possibility:

I still remember one of my supervisors laughing at a video of me working with one of my clients. The client was a good Christian woman from Indiana who honestly felt that her unhappiness stemmed from her spiritual struggles. My supervisor was perfectly clear, “Help her get out of that religious claptrap. Her sadness has nothing to do with God. It has solely to do with her lack of reinforcements or pleasures in her life.” Now, as a doctoral student who was anxious to please, I’m ashamed to say, I carried my supervisor’s message back to this Christian woman. In fact, I was so good at selling this message that she eventually learned not to think of her happiness in relation to God at all. She learned to think of herself and her relationships as though God had nothing to do with her emotions and

the relevant events of her life. "After all", I recall her saying, "What you're saying Brent has to be right because science has proven it."

When my client and I were finished, she no longer saw God as the source of her emotional healing. She no longer considered even the possibility that her spiritual struggles could be intertwined with her emotional struggles. At least for this part of her life, she was a Christian atheist, a Christian in other aspects of her life, but an atheist in her understanding of her emotions. I do think however, that if she had continued her therapy with me and my supervisor, I would have persuaded her little by little, one problem after another, to understand every part of her life as though God didn't matter (Slife, 2013).

This example of transformation is striking, but not rare. On the contrary, many psychotherapy approaches that seek to integrate religion and spirituality into therapeutic work, operationalize and truncate clients' and therapists' theistic experiences and interpretations into psychological constructs and mechanisms that will work within the profession's naturalistic worldview. Transformations and operationalizations include: "virtues" (Petee, 2013), "basic human values" (Corey, n.d., p. 118), "religious content" (Abernethy & Lancia, 1998), "the dynamic human spirit" (Helminiak, 2001), a dimension of personality (Piedmont & Wilkins, 2013), an evolved meaning-making system (Paloutzian, 2017), and above all others, beliefs (Khoynezhad, Rajaei, & Sarvarazemy, 2012).

By focusing on and working with naturalized constructs, like religious beliefs or values, therapists might assume they are open to their clients' theism. However, if religious beliefs or values are understood by the therapist only naturalistically, for example, as mental states that evolve to help people make and find meaning in their lives (Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017), then the therapist is not open to the possibility that God could be involved and actively participating in the formation of those beliefs. Paloutzian's work on beliefs confirms this (e.g., Paloutzian & Mukai, 2017; Seitz, Paloutzian, & Angel, 2018). For Paloutzian and his colleagues theists' beliefs about God are "a mental activity generated by neural circuits in the brain" (Seitz, Paloutzian, & Angel, 2017, p. 3).

On this account, clients' religious beliefs are naturalistic even if the target of the beliefs is God or God's

activity and even if the believer describes experiencing God's involvement in the development of the beliefs. In this way, the therapist transforms the theists' theism into naturalism. Once transformed, the basic processes involved in theistic beliefs are understood to be the same as the basic processes involved in all other beliefs. As a result, as Maloney (1998) puts it in his somewhat dated but still apropos description of the psychological processes that underlie conversion, "the decision of a Muslim to become a Moonie is no different than the decision to change from using an electric typewriter to using a computer" (para. 5). Each "conversion" involves a process of change in belief system, but the nature of the belief systems involved is not relevant.

Once theism is naturalized in this way, therapists can work with religious and spiritual beliefs in the same way they work with other beliefs in their treatment. In Religious Cognitive-Emotional Therapy (RCET, Rajaei, 2010), for example, the therapist interprets the client's theism in the same way the therapist would understand any other beliefs, as being more or less rational, supportive of health, or helpful in finding meaning. As a set of beliefs, RCET therapists can apply the same techniques to the treatment of theistic client's beliefs as any other client's beliefs to help them change or reframe any irrational or unhealthy beliefs into beliefs that promote mental health and wellbeing.

If a client tells their therapist that their emotional struggles are a consequence of God punishing them for past sins, the RCET therapist interprets that statement for the sake of treatment, not as a description of the client's relationship with God or as a description of God's activity in relation to the client's righteousness, but as a problematic set of beliefs that need to be changed. Change for the RCET practitioner is about the valence of the belief, more so than the content. Negative beliefs, regardless of what they are about, need to be changed into positive beliefs, because a positive view of the world promotes mental health and wellbeing, as the RCET therapist understands it (Rajaei, 2010). So, the therapist works with the theistic client to reframe and adjust their negative belief about God and God's punishment into a positive belief about God and God's support. The excerpt below outlines the process by which this is done:

The RCET therapist identifies the clients negative and nihilistic beliefs about the world and existence and helps them to change these beliefs into positive and purposeful ones, so that the clients acquire a new insight of existence. . . The therapist makes clients aware of God's role. (God is the best patron with best characteristics that guides human beings). When people accept God as the unique creator, they will gain the safe and reliable force in the world and feel relief in their lives (Rajaei, 2010, p. 84-85).

Even though theistic clients may desire and feel "that God could be included in their therapy, both as a contributor and as a relationship" (Holmberg, Jensen, & Vetere, 2020, p. 8), the RCET therapist does not have to include these participative, relational features in their treatment. They could be added on for effect, but they are not necessary (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010). For the RCET therapist, all that is needed is a reframing of their clients' beliefs about God and God's role from one that is negative, irrational, and unhealthy to one that is positive, rational, and promotes mental health. The risk of value imposition involved, however, as we saw with the anecdote above (Slife, 2013), is that these transformations of theism, as the client experiences and understands it, into naturalism, as the therapist understands it, might persuade clients that God does not really matter. That is, an operationalization of theism into a set of beliefs might teach the client to understand their relationship to God and God's activity as only a matter of their personal beliefs, beliefs which they can choose and change, as they might change from using a PC to a MAC computer. They can do all of this with the help of the therapist, but apparently not with the help of an actively engaged God.

PSYCHOTHERAPISTS' RISK OF OMITTING THEISM FROM THEISTIC THEORIES

Do we see any evidence that counselors and psychotherapists omit theism from theistic theories in their therapeutic practice? I have already mentioned Butera's (2010) assertion that Aquinas's psychology can stand alone without attending to Aquinas's theism, but I should note here that Butera's ultimate purpose for importing Aquinas's psychology into the discipline is to use it as a "theoretical framework" for understanding and treating emotional disorders using

Cognitive Therapy (CT). Believing that he can separate Aquinas's psychology from Aquinas's theology without irrevocable consequence to that psychology in the psychotherapy context, Butera seeks to provide all CT practitioners with a secular theoretical foundation that will guide their application of CT.

Similarly, existential psychotherapists who utilize Kierkegaard's theoretical concepts in their practice acknowledge Kierkegaard's theism, but believe they can separate that theism off from their therapy and secularize Kierkegaard's religious and spiritual concepts in developing and applying their therapeutic practices. Spivak (2004), for example writes that:

Kierkegaard's writings range from the philosophical to the deeply religious. I have drawn from both streams of his thinking but have secularized his more religious concepts. I believe that his writings so powerfully portray a genius' incisive observations of human struggle, that even when his religious intent is de-emphasized, the concepts that are distilled can greatly empower the process of psychotherapy and counseling (p. 2).

Wanting to be clear that he is not the first or only therapist to omit Kierkegaard's theism, Spivak goes on to note that "the secularization and use of Kierkegaard's works for psychotherapeutic theory and practice is not unique. Many psychotherapists including Guntrup (1969), Binswanger (1944), and Loewald (1980) utilized Kierkegaard's writings to enhance their work" (p. 3).

Finally, like Carl Rogers, psychotherapists who have imported Martin Buber's philosophy into psychotherapy (e.g., Scott, et al., 2009) have left Buber's theism out. Even, Maurice Friedman (2002a), the foremost expert on Buber's philosophy, developed a dialogical psychotherapy in which Buber's central theistic relationality has been altered so that only the I-Thou relation between client and therapist is discussed:

By "dialogical psychotherapy," we mean a therapy that is centered on the meeting between the therapist and his or her client or among family members as the central healing mode. . . Only when it is recognized that everything that takes place within therapy—free association, dreams, silence, pain, anguish—takes place within the context of the vital relationship between therapist and patient do we have what may properly be called dialogical psychotherapy (p. 11-12).

A significant problem in each of these cases, is that theologians and philosophers who have studied these thinkers' work in great depth and detail, have noted that the importation of these thinkers' ideas into psychotherapy with their theism removed, is not possible, or at least fundamentally alters the ideas and the practices that ensue from them. Philosophers Tietjen and Evans (2011), for example, have shown that therapists who wish to use Kierkegaard's ideas cannot escape Kierkegaard's theistic commitments: "If Kierkegaard offers contemporary therapists anything at all, it is quite clear that it is not value-free or neutral. Mental health is inextricably linked to spiritual health, and ultimately a client's relationship with Christ cannot be dismissed as incidental to the healing process" (p. 282). Ventimiglia (2008) intimates the same concern with Buber's work, noting that "Buber's religious beliefs are basic to his system of dialogical psychotherapy. . . For Buber, God is at the heart of every human encounter. He is the "Eternal Thou" that is experienced in every genuine meeting between two people" (p. 612).

Most curiously, Friedman, asserts in his theological and philosophical publications that the relationship with God is central to Buber's thinking, is the source of transformation, and cannot be separated from our relationships with each other, as this example illustrates:

The fundamental beliefs of Buber's I-Thou philosophy are the reality of the I-Thou relation into which no deception can penetrate, the reality of the meeting between God and man which transforms man's being, and the reality of the turning which puts a limit to man's movement away from God (Friedman, 2002b, p. 87).

However, in his psychological publications where he reviews his dialogical psychotherapy based on Buber's work, he makes no mention of our relationship to God and its transformative impact on our being at all:

Buber's 'I-Thou' philosophy is concerned with the difference between mere existence and authentic existence, between being barely human and being more fully human, between remaining fragmented and bringing the conflicting parts of oneself into an active unity, between partial and fuller relationships with others (Friedman, 2002a, p. 9).

It would seem that Friedman, perhaps with the guidance of journal editors and peer reviewers, is aware of

psychology's professional commitment to naturalism and, as a result, leaves the theism that is central to Buber's work completely out of his psychological publications. The odd consequence of that omission is an education and training in a dialogical psychotherapy that is based on Buber's work, but leaves "the reality of the meeting between God and Man which transforms man's being" (Friedman, 2002b, p. 87) out of the therapeutic process, a process which, for Buber, requires God's participation.

These omissions of theism from theistic theories in the practice of psychotherapy does not allow theistic clients access to the transformative and healing core of the theory. In all three of these cases, but especially in Kierkegaard and Buber's work, these thinkers dedicated their lives to understanding how a person's relationship with God is necessary to and can bring about transformative and healing mental and spiritual outcomes, including relief from depression, anxiety, and social isolation. To deprive a client of faith access to these theistic insights and relational engagements because the therapist knowingly or unknowingly endorses the professional value of naturalism risks an unethical imposition that could stand in the way of improved health and wellbeing.

TRAINING IN THEISM

If, as these illustrations discussed above suggest, there is at least the risk of imposing the professional value of naturalism on clients in psychotherapy and counseling, and if that imposition might result in the exclusion, transformation, or omission of theism in the practice of psychotherapy and counseling, then as the code of ethics asserts, ethical counselors will seek training in this area of risk. This would seem to be especially important given that anywhere from 53% to 77% of clients want to discuss religious and spiritual issues with their therapist and 72% of clients would prefer to work with a therapist who respects and integrates the client's faith into the therapy work (Pearce, 2015). Unfortunately, even among psychotherapists and counselors who do want to be more inclusive of their client's faiths in their work, many do not feel sufficiently trained (Vogel, et al., 2013) and competent to do so (Hathaway, Scott, & Garver, 2004). In light of these feelings and given the high risk of professional

value imposition just reviewed, regular and meaningful training in theism is critically needed and should be actively pursued by psychotherapists and counselors. This paper introduces some of the key features of theism as an initial educational step toward the development of a more comprehensive training program in this area of significant need.

THE THEISM CONTINUUM

Theism, like naturalism (Dixon, 2008) or any other worldview is not a monolith. Theists can differ widely on their assumptions and experiences concerning the nature of God's activity in the world. One theist might experience and understand God as directly and personally involved in every aspect of their life, while another might describe God's activity in their life as limited to rare miracles. Theistic theologians and philosophers differ in their experience and understanding of God's involvement in the world as well, including the three exemplar philosophers discussed previously in this article. Aquinas, for example, views God as directly inaccessible and unknowable. For Aquinas, it is only through the *via negativa* or negative way (i.e., by knowing what God is not), that we gain an indirect sense of what God is. As such, Aquinas:

distances from our world all discussion of real divine relation by stating quite baldly, 'there is no real relation in God to the creature.' Creatures, that is, may experience a real relationship of dependence on and need of God, but God experiences no such relationship to his creatures (Mackey, 1983, p. 182).

Buber's theism, by contrast, is direct, personal, and relational. In his words, God:

enters into a direct relation with us men in creative, revealing, and redeeming acts, and thus makes it possible for us to enter into a direct relation with him. This ground and meaning of our existence constitutes a mutuality, arising again and again, such as can subsist only between persons" (Buber, 1958, p. 135).

Kierkegaard (1846/1992), like Buber, embraces a relational theism in which God is personal and directly involved in our lives, such that "the God-relationship of the individual human being is the main point" (p. 77). It is "what makes a human being a human being" (p. 244). However, Kierkegaard not only writes about God's involvement in our lives as a

matter of his theorizing, but as his direct experience of God's difference-making participation in his writing. Kierkegaard states that God not only provided the help and assistance he needed to write each day, but that God also "directed things behind the scenes, when K was not yet conscious of the full meaning of his written words" (Moser & McCreary, 2010, p. 128) and "had curbed me in every respect" (Kierkegaard, 1859/1998, p. 87). As a result of God's ongoing participation in the writing process, Kierkegaard can state with confidence that God "finds favor" (p. 24) in the works produced and that "it is truly pleasing to God that the truth is served in this way" (p. 60).

Just as our three exemplar theistic philosophers differ in their ideas and experiences of God's activity in the world, therapists should expect differences among their clients (as well as differences among theistic therapists). Furthermore, they should be prepared for their clients to have a less explicit and less well-defined articulation of their theistic position than theologians and philosophers who have dedicated much of their lives to thinking about these things. Nevertheless, theistic clients will bring to therapy experiences and ideas about God's activity in the world that matter to the way they live and understand their lives, and it behooves the ethical therapist, who is sensitive to the risk of imposing their personal and professional values and perspectives on their clients, to engage clients in a discussion, first about whether they are theists and second, to what degree they view God as actively involved in their lives. In order to do this effectively, ethical therapists will seek to gain an understanding of the common forms of theism and will benefit from learning to identify where these forms fall on the continuum of God's activity in the world (fig. 1). They will also examine their own position on these matters and share that position with the client as they discuss how therapy might proceed.

Before examining the common forms of theism, it is important to define the poles of the theism continuum. The terms used to designate these poles, "weak" and "strong" theism do not speak to God's strength or to the strength of a person's faith. They also do not designate a moral position, as if one pole is good and the other bad. They simply designate the conceptualized level of God's activity or involvement in the world. If God is experienced and assumed to be

The Theism Continuum

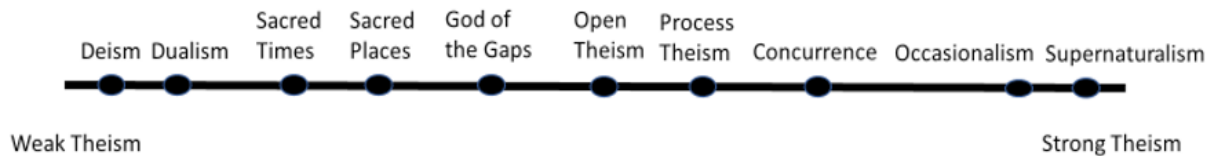


Figure 1. The theism continuum.

involved in everything that happens in the world at all times and in all spaces, then the theism is strong. If God is assumed to be only involved in certain, rare times and places, then the theism is weak.

One way to understand the distinction between weak and strong forms of theism is in terms of limitations. In weak theism some form of a priori spatial and/or temporal limits on God's activity are assumed to be necessary (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010). These limits are often put in place to reconcile theism with naturalism. A number of 18th century scientists, for example, limited God's activity in the workings of nature to the creation period or to occasional miraculous moments of intervention, like the parting of the Red Sea. Aside from these unusual times of direct involvement and intervention, these scientists asserted that natural causes and processes operate without interruption or alteration by a divine source (Dixon, 2008).

Strong theistic approaches, on the other hand, would require that no a priori spatial, temporal, or any other form of limitation is placed on God's activity. As Slife, Stevenson, and Wendt (2010) describe it, for a strong theist "God's activity would be seen as *potentially* unlimited at any given time and at any given place, including the here and now of the psychotherapy session" (p. 166). The only restriction on that potentiality would be any self-limitations that God would choose, not some set of necessary *a priori* restrictions. God may choose, for example, to limit or "bind" himself through specific promises or covenants

made with an individual (Helaman 10:5-10) or group of people (D&C 82:10).

The poles of the theism continuum could as easily be labeled "limited" and "unlimited" as they are weak and strong, but given the predominate use of weak and strong theism in the literature, this article will use those more common terms as well. The figure above indicates where on the theism continuum, with weak theism on the left and strong theism on the right, the most common forms of theism fall. Five of these common forms of theism fall on the left half of the continuum and as such can be regarded as representing varying levels of weak theism. The other five fall on the right half of the spectrum and can be understood as representing varying levels of strong theism. Each of the five weak forms of theism, ranging from the weakest of the weak to the strongest of the weak, will be reviewed first, followed by the forms of strong theism, ranging from the strongest of the strong to the weakest of the strong.

WEAK THEISM

Deism and Dualism. These two forms of theism are located on the far-left side of the continuum because both place major limitations on God's activity. Deism is the idea that at the time of creation God was directly, intentionally, and actively engaged in the world, but once the creation period was complete God stepped away from the universe to allow it to run according to natural laws autonomously (i.e., without divine intervention). The quote below captures the essence of this

form of theism and illustrates the implications of this significant temporal limitation on God's activity:

According to deism, we can know by the natural light of reason that the universe is created and governed by a supreme intelligence; however, although this supreme being has a plan for creation from the beginning, the being does not interfere with creation; the deist typically rejects miracles and reliance on special revelation as a source of religious doctrine and belief, in favor of the natural light of reason. Thus, a deist typically rejects the divinity of Christ, as repugnant to reason; the deist typically demotes the figure of Jesus from agent of miraculous redemption to extraordinary moral teacher. Deism is the form of religion fitted to the new discoveries in natural science, according to which the cosmos displays an intricate machine-like order; the deists suppose that the supposition of God is necessary as the source or author of this order (Bristow, 2017, section 2.3, para. 4).

The common simile for deism is God as the perfect watchmaker, who set all things in order, wound the watch up, and then let the watch run its intended course without any additional tinkering.

Dualism, like Deism, separates God and God's activity from the world we live in, but does so spatially. For the dualist there are two worlds or realms, the realm in which God dwells, which is divine and metaphysical, colloquially referred to as heaven, and the realm in which we dwell, the earth, which is human and physical (Dixon, 2008). Given their unique natures (e.g., God and heaven's perfection vs. Human and Earthly imperfection) these two worlds cannot and do not directly interact or affect each other. They run alongside or parallel to each other. For theologians who embrace dualism this means that Jesus Christ was not and could not be "literally divine" (McCabe, 1985, p. 471) and that "God did not literally suffer in Jesus" when he was nailed to the cross. Instead, God "surveys the suffering of Jesus and the rest of mankind" from his wholly transcendent heavenly purview and perhaps knows "a kind of mental anguish at the follies and sins of creatures" (ibid).

The ontological and metaphysical forms of naturalism described in the first part of this article are both dualistic in that they separate the natural world and its processes, events, and causes, from what they describe as the supernatural world. Of course, for the

ontological naturalist, the supernatural realm is a fiction and is not a real world. For the methodological naturalist, it could be real, but it cannot be studied or understood using the scientific method, nor does it have any necessary bearing on the operations of the natural world. In this sense, dualism results in the same outcome as deism, which is that God and God's activity are not part of the world we currently live (Slife & Reber, 2009).

Although Deism mostly came and went as a form of religion during the Enlightenment, remnants of this weak form of theism continue to inform the way many theists see the world. Dualism, on the other hand, which has been around since the time of the pre-Socratics, is very much alive and well today, both within naturalistic science and scientific psychology, as well as among the laity and some theologians. Given its compatibility with naturalism, many therapists of faith also likely embrace some form of deistic and/or dualistic theism.

In light of its ubiquity, therapists should expect to encounter clients who, when asked about God and God's activity in the world, would say that they believe God exists and they believe we are created by God. At the same time, they also believe that God created us with our minds and our capacity for reason and empirical science so we would manage and make sense of this life and work out our psychological issues on our own. In such cases, therapy with theistic clients of a deistic or dualistic type would likely proceed with little change from the therapeutic approach used with non-theists or atheists, except that the client's religion and spirituality might be included as a source of some of the client's beliefs. These beliefs, like any other beliefs, could be examined in terms of their irrationality and negativity and could be treated using principles and techniques like those described by RCET or other CBT approaches to therapy. It is likely that a client who endorses a deistic and/or dualistic form of theism would have little if any concerns with therapy of this type and would probably support it.

Sacred Places and Sacred Times. Continuing with temporal and spatial limitations on God and God's activity, there are forms of weak theism that allow for God's involvement in this world, but only at times and in locations that are unique for their holiness. As such, these forms of theism are found somewhat closer to

the center of the theism continuum. For sacred space theists, there are specific places that are endowed with a special sacredness that allows for God's involvement in our lives at that place. Within the Jewish faith tradition, Mount Sinai, the tabernacle which housed the ark of the covenant, and eventually the Holy of Holies within Solomon's temple, were places of a uniquely hallowed designation where a prophet could receive revelation from God in a way that might not be possible otherwise. In Christianity, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, who was in Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jerusalem, Gethsemane, and Golgotha made these locations sacred places where God walked among men and taught them, healed them, and redeemed them. And, for Muslim theists, Mecca, where Muhammad was born and the Dome of the Rock covering the place where Muhammad's ascent to heaven began are holy places where God's presence is manifested.

Many theists take pilgrimages to these holy sites seeking revelation, guidance, and purification from divinity that cannot be achieved in everyday places. Eliade (1980) illuminates the theistic conception and experience of sacred space:

Within the sacred precincts the profane world is transcended. On the most archaic levels of culture this possibility of transcendence is expressed by various images of an opening; here, in the sacred enclosure, communication with the gods is made possible; hence there must be a door to the world above, by which the gods can descend to earth and man can symbolically ascend to heaven. We shall soon see that this was the case in many religions; properly speaking, the temple constitutes an opening in the upward direction and ensures communication with the world of the gods. Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different (p. 25-26).

Sacred times are also viewed and experienced by many theists as unique periods in which God is active in the world. Passover, Ramadan, and both the coming of Christ and the anticipated second coming of Christ are sacred times for many theists for they signify events in which God's presence and activity was and is made manifest on earth. Similarly, the holy days and festivals that honor these sacred events, like Christmas and Hanukkah, are thought by many theists to

be time periods that bring heaven closer to earth than would otherwise be possible. Eliade (1987) speaks of the way in which festivals commemorating sacred events can "reactualize" that sacredness and God's activity in it. Sacred time, he writes:

Is the time that was created and sanctified by the gods at the period of their *gesta*, of which the festival is precisely a reactualization. In other words the participants in the festival meet in it *the first appearance of sacred time*, as it appeared *ab origine, in illo tempore*. . . By creating the various realities that today constitute the world, the gods *also founded sacred time*, for the time contemporary with a creation was necessarily sanctified by the presence and activity of the gods (p. 69-70).

Therapy clients who endorse a sacred space/sacred time theism differ from deistic and dualistic theists in that for them God is involved in our world in a difference-making way, albeit only in those places and times that are sacred and holy. All other places and times are profane, meaning they operate as they always do, following natural laws and processes regardless of God's existence and activity. For these theists, religion and spirituality, then, constitutes more than a set of beliefs or the workings of the rational mind that God has given human beings in our creation. Religion and spirituality include experiences that have occurred in holy places and within sacred times in which God was present and participatory in a meaningful way. It may also mean that they see their path to health and well-being as one that needs to include visits or even pilgrimages to sacred places and participation in sacred events and festivals where the client can commune with God and receive guidance, comfort, and support. Therapists working with clients of this stripe would want and need to be prepared to appreciate, encourage, and integrate visits to sacred sites, like churches, temples, and synagogues, as well as participation in sacred holy days, rituals, and festivals into their work with clients alongside their more naturalistic techniques and practices in order to treat the whole person in a way that does not discriminate against their clients' sacred place and sacred time theism.

"God of the Gaps". Somewhat closer to the center of the continuum, God of the Gaps theism emerged initially as an Enlightenment theology that tried to explain phenomena that scientists could not account

for within their Deistic conception of the world. Plantinga (1997) outlines the precepts of this original conception:

Natural science investigates and lays out the structure of this cosmic machine, in particular by trying to discover and lay bare [natural] laws, and to explain the phenomena in terms of them. There seem to be *some* phenomena, however, that resist a naturalistic explanation — so far, at any rate. We should therefore postulate a deity in terms of whose actions we can explain these things that current science cannot. Newton's suggestion that God periodically adjusts the orbits of the planets is often cited as just such an example of God-of-the-gaps theology. The following, therefore, are the essential points of God-of-the-gaps theology. First, the world is a vast machine that is almost entirely self-sufficient; divine activity in nature is limited to those phenomena for which there is no scientific, i.e., mechanical and naturalistic explanation. Second, the existence of God is a kind of large-scale hypothesis postulated to explain what cannot be explained otherwise, i.e., naturalistically. Third, there is the apologetic emphasis: the best or one of the best reasons for believing that there is such a person as God is the fact that there are phenomena that natural science cannot (so far) explain naturalistically (para. 2).

Though both strong theists, like Plantinga, and many naturalists have refuted God of the Gaps as a coherent and persuasive theology, some contemporary theists do invoke God's activity to explain personal life events and experiences that science cannot or has not yet explained. For example, when medical professionals and the scientific instruments and tests they employ fail to explain how a loved one seemingly miraculously healed from a life-threatening injury or disease following faithful prayers or blessings given on their behalf, family and friends will often reference God's intervention. When a person hears an audible voice instruct them to turn down one street instead of another and they find out that a horrible car accident occurred on the street not taken, science cannot explain the voice and its direction to the driver, but the activity of God does explain the protective voice for the theist. Given that for a number of these theists there are more than a few Gaps that God fills and God does so on somewhat regular occasion, this form of theism falls closer to the center of the theism continuum.

Contemporary God of the Gaps theists, then, are very comfortable relying upon science for explanations of many of the phenomena and events that take place in the world. They trust in medicine, technology, and scientific research for many, if not most aspects of their lives. As such, theistic clients of this type would be comfortable with science-based therapeutic practices and treatments for much of their therapy. At the same time, they have experienced God's involvement in their lives in areas where science may be lacking or does not apply, areas like miracles, personal revelation, material blessings that come to the obedient and faithful (e.g., from paying tithing), and so on. In a therapeutic context, clients who embrace this form of theism might want to work with a therapist who is open to talking about these events and experiences and is willing to do so in terms of a God who is involved in certain aspects of the clients' lives. They may also desire or even expect that in addition to using therapeutic techniques and practices that have received scientific support and are helpful for many aspects of their treatment, the therapist would be open to and might even involve the activity of God in understanding and treating features of the clients' disorders and issues where scientific explanation and treatment fall short.

STRONG THEISM

A defining feature of weak theism is that the limitations placed on God and God's activity in the world stem from naturalism and science. In the case of strong theism, there are either no limitations placed on God at all or the limitations are self-imposed by God, but no limitations come from the natural world or scientists' study of it. Two forms of strong theism that place no limitations on God and God's activity will first be reviewed followed by a description of two forms of strong theism in which God's activity is self-limited.

Supernaturalism. Located on the extreme right side of the continuum, supernaturalism represents the theological position that there are no natural or consistent causes. Instead, God directly causes everything that exists and happens in every moment and does so solely according to His will. This form of theism, which is sometimes associated with pantheism and extreme forms of theistic determinism, has ancient origins across many early religions and cultures. It was

directly challenged by proponents of the philosophy of naturalism, which emerged primarily at the time of the Renaissance and became fully realized in the Scientific Revolution. Naturalists' chief concern with supernaturalism is that "because in every occurrence only divine will matters, [supernaturalism] precludes any human understanding of cosmic functioning" (Helminiak, 2013, p. 44). Nothing can be explained, even the consistent and replicable speed at which a ball rolls down an incline plane, beyond "God wills it so".

This form of theism is widely refuted by naturalists and theologians alike, largely because it restricts our understanding of the world and compromises free-will, yet threads of it can be found among some theists who attribute everything that happens in the world and to them personally to God's will. Therapists who encounter clients who embrace this form of theism will find that they give all credit to God for who they are, what they have experienced, and what they will become. Also, since God is the agent of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, then any change in their psychology, including change resulting from the therapist's practices and techniques, will come from God and will only occur if God happens to will it. In this sense, the therapist too is caused by God, as is the theorist who developed the therapeutic approach initially, as is the effectiveness of the techniques associated with the approach. God's hand is actively and directly bringing about the efficacy of all these things.

Occasionalism. Just to the left of supernaturalism on the theism continuum is occasionalism. Occasionalism, like supernaturalism, holds the position that there are no natural laws and God is the direct cause of all things. However, God has made a covenant to maintain regularities and order in nature by intervening at every point in time. As Plantinga (2001) describes it, "God is already and always intimately acting in nature which depends from moment to moment . . . upon divine activity" (Plantinga, 2001, p. 350). Consequently, Plantinga (2016) argues, every time I have the will to raise my arm, God takes the occasion of my willing it to raise it, for only God can cause such a thing to happen:

The only causal power is divine causal power. God causes every change that occurs. God is the only real cause. Sometimes, however, there is a correlation between certain events and God's causing some other

event; for example, there is a more or less constant correlation between my willing to raise my arm and my arm's rising. That is because God ordinarily takes my willing to raise my arm as the occasion for causing my arm to rise (p. 136).

This "more or less constant correlation" that God allows and facilitates makes possible regularities in the world that make explanation and prediction possible and still allows for human agency (though Plantinga himself is unclear on how our will is not also caused by God). Occasionalists then, like Supernaturalists, give all credit to God for all that is and all that they do and become, but they also appreciate God's promise to act consistently and constantly, for the most part in predictable and understandable ways. Theistic clients of this type would be less likely to describe God as capricious than the supernaturalist and would demonstrate less of a superstitious theism. The therapy process, from the occasionalist perspective, consists of a series of more or less constantly correlated human willing/ God acting events that are all brought to fruition by God. As such, God is fully present and intimately involved in every aspect of therapy and its outcomes, for good or ill, just as God is active in all mental disorders and issues, and in every occasion for health and wellbeing. Occasionalism, then, is a thoroughgoing theism in which God acts consistently and constantly in the lives of clients and therapists and in their work together.

Concurrence. The forms of theism that are right of center on the theism continuum all involve a level of God's self-limitation that is not found in occasionalism and supernaturalism. In concurrence theism, for example, God is the primary cause of all things, but he allows human beings to be secondary causes (i.e., to make decisions; Vicens, n.d.). Sproul (n.d.) describes concurrence through the example of Job:

In essence, concurrence says that two or more parties can act in the same event and produce a given outcome without all parties having the same intent. Job's life is a good illustration of concurrence. Satan intended to discredit Job, and by extension, to discredit God. The intent of the Chaldeans and Sabeans was to enrich themselves. Our Lord's intent was to vindicate Job's faith. Each of these players was necessarily involved in Job's suffering, but at different levels and with different motivations (para. 3).

Concurrent theism is a popular form of theism today as it supports many theists' belief in and experience of moral agency and accountability, but it also acknowledges a very involved and purposeful God who wants human beings to grow and learn from their choices and mistakes while still guiding us toward the outcomes He has designed for us. Therapists who encounter concurrent theists as clients and have a conversation with them about God and God's activity in therapy will likely find that they give God ultimate credit for their lives and their circumstances. At the same time, they also genuinely believe that their choices and the choices of others matter and have contributed to who they are and to the issues and concerns that have led them to seek therapy—all for the greater good of realizing God's will. Not unlike the example of Job above, the concurrent theistic client would see such things as parental neglect or even abuse in their childhood as bad choices made by parents that nevertheless work within God's plan for the client. The client, like Job, will desire to make choices about how to interpret, live with, and heal from that history in ways that align with God's will, and a therapist who understands that desire can be helpful in that process, for the therapist too makes choices about treatment that, from the client's perspective are ultimately concurrent with the activity of God, whether the therapist intends that concurrence or not.

Process Theism and Open Theism. These two forms of theism both embrace the idea that God self-limits, each to varying degrees, for the sake of having a full and meaningful relationship with his children. In process theism:

it is an essential attribute of God to be fully involved in and affected by temporal processes. This idea contrasts neatly with traditional forms of theism that hold God to be or at least conceived as being, *in all respects* non-temporal (eternal), unchanging (immutable,) and unaffected by the world (impassible). Process theism does not deny that God is *in some respects* eternal, immutable, and impassible, but it contradicts the classical view by insisting that God is *in some respects* temporal, mutable, and passible (Viney, 2018, para. 1).

Open theism increases the level of God's self-limitation to such a degree that there is genuine give and take with God, God allows himself to be

surprised by us, and we can choose to go against God's will. As Rissler (n.d.) describes it:

Because God loves us and desires that we freely choose to reciprocate His love, He has made His knowledge of, and plans for, the future conditional upon our actions. Though omniscient, God does not know what we will freely do in the future. Though omnipotent, He has chosen to invite us to freely collaborate with Him in governing and developing His creation, thereby also allowing us the freedom to thwart His hopes for us. (para. 1)

The distinguishing feature of both of these forms of theism is human self-determination, which God allows for and makes genuine by limiting his determination and to some extent his foreknowledge. Therapy clients who embrace these forms of theism experience their relationship with God as mutual and open to the possibility that the human side can persuade the God side of the relationship in some ways. They see God as involved in every aspect of their lives, but not in a determinative way, as much as in an open, responsive, and collaborative way. These clients may not only want to discuss this open and responsive relationship with their therapist, but they would likely also want the therapist to participate in this relationship, collaborating with the client and with God as active participants working together in the treatment process.

INCLUDING THEISM IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

This review of the various forms of theism located along the theism continuum is not intended to be exhaustive. Nor does it suggest that theists find themselves located once and for all on a given point on the continuum. As with other aspects of human being, theism is contextual and fluid and can shift and change, especially in times of crisis and suffering, which are often the times in which people seek out therapy. In light of this, the theism continuum should be considered a guide or signpost to help therapists prepare for and navigate their initial and ongoing discussions with theistic clients. It also offers therapists of faith some points for reflection on their own theism and the opportunity to think carefully and critically about how they generally relate theism to naturalism within their therapeutic approach and how they might need to adjust their typical approach when working

compartmentalization tendencies, these practices and activities can be:

conceptualized either as requiring an active God or as working through more conventional psychological mechanisms, and thus not requiring an active God. In peripheral theism, therapy strategies may include and even focus on these peripheral aspects, but their relation to or need of an active God is not part of their understanding or significance (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010, p. 170).

In peripheral theism, then, the therapist includes theistic practices and activities in the therapy process, but ignores or separates off the theistic components of the practice that for theists are necessary. Consequently, rather than forgiveness requiring God's grace to soften the heart of a wounded or offended person, forgiveness is understood only as "a sequential process of ceased resentment followed by understanding, empathy, and altruism" (Krejci, 2004, p. 96). God's activity is moved to the periphery and as such becomes unnecessary to the implementation and efficacy of the practice in the psychotherapy process. The therapist can add on theistic language and reference God's grace and other activities in the application of the practice, but only because the client desires it, not because God's activity is necessary for change. Thus, as Liccione (2017) states with regard to the use of forgiveness in therapy as a peripheral aspect of theism, "one of its advantages is that it can be applied with or without a theological context." (Liccione, 2017, para. 8). Not so for the strongly theistic client who experiences God's grace moving through them as a necessary condition for forgiveness.

INCONSISTENT THEISM

Some therapists may believe that some aspects of therapy require and relate to an active God, while other aspects do not. Slife, Stevenson, and Wendt (2010) describe inconsistent theism as:

an attempt to combine—within the context of therapy—the incompatible assumptions of naturalism and theism, resulting in a dualistic form of weak theism where God's activity is limited to a certain realm or set of factors. The theistic components of therapy are thus inconsistent with the naturalistic components (p. 171).

Inconsistent theism is closer to strong theism than compartmentalized and peripheral theism, but limitations are still placed on God and God's activity, and they are usually put in place by the therapist for naturalistic reasons.

Inconsistent theistic therapists might include theistic interventions and practices in areas that appear more obviously spiritual to them (e.g., seeking forgiveness), but exclude theistic interventions and practices from areas that they perceive to be more naturalistic (e.g., drug therapy). Such an approach would be incompatible with strong forms of theism that place no limitations on God's activity and are embraced by many theistic clients. As a result, psychotherapists approaching theism inconsistently might intentionally or unintentionally teach their clients that "the spiritual portion of therapy, in which God's activity is clearly needed, could be viewed as an 'add-on' to the naturalistic theories and methods that are presumably seen as neutral to God's activity" (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010, p. 172).

THOROUGHGOING THEISM

For counselors and psychotherapists who assume a thoroughgoing theism, "God is seen to be already present in the world and is potentially involved at all times and in all places" (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010, p. 168), including the therapy office. This could mean that God is seen as the sufficient cause of everything that happens in therapy, as in supernaturalism and occasionalism. Or, rather, God is a necessary condition for what happens in therapy, along with other psychological and contextual conditions, including the client and the therapist's free-will, as in open and process theism. In any case, "God's activity is conceptualized to be the center of therapeutic change" (ibid). This negates the possibility of compartmentalization or inconsistent theism and means "prayer and other peripheral aspects have a unique meaning from their relation to a God who is already present and functionally active" (p. 167). For the thoroughgoing theistic therapist, "God's necessary activity is clearly reflected at all levels of theory, method, and practice" (ibid).

Strongly theistic clients would find the inclusion of God's involvement in every aspect of therapy supportive of their thoroughgoing theistic worldview and

would work very well with therapists who also embrace this form of theism. Clients who embrace weak forms of theism, on the other hand, would not share the thoroughgoing theistic therapist's perspective that "God's influence is conceptualized 'all the way down'" (Slife, Stevenson, & Wendt, 2010, p. 168) and would likely prefer some form of compartmentalization of theism in the therapy process. As with the other risks of a mismatch between the therapist's conceptualization of theism and that of the client's, it will be essential for therapists to have initial and ongoing conversations about their clients' position on theism and naturalism and to carefully and critically examine any potential risks of their personal and professional values, including in this case strong theistic values, being imposed on the theistic clients they treat.

CONCLUSION

Theistic clients who are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are as likely to vary across the theism continuum as other religious and spiritual individuals. Thus, therapists who are also church members should not presume that their church member clients' theism is uniform or matches their own. It may be true that "members believe God speaks to them, answers their questions and responds to their needs" (Oswald, n.d., slide 2), and that God's direct revelation to individuals "may come in a variety of ways, such as "pure intelligence flowing into you ... sudden strokes of ideas", or even as "a small number of Mormons report that they have had a vision" (Koltko, 1991, p. 15). Still, a number of theistic members place temporal and/or spatial limits on the conditions under which that revelation takes place. Some conceptualize and compartmentalize the natural aspects of life and their psychology as separate from the theistic aspects. Others see God as ultimately responsible for everything that happens to this world and to them, even if they have a secondary free-will that works concurrently with God's primary purposes. And, at least a few members of the church conceptualize God's activity as self-limited to accommodate for human self-direction, even to such a degree that God can be surprised by our decisions and actions or perhaps even change His mind in response to our persuasive entreaties.

Being members of the same church does not obviate the risk of value imposition in the area of theism. It could, given potential presumptions of similarity by therapists actually encourage value imposition, including the professional value of naturalism. Thus, it is especially important that therapists who are members of the church receive training in theism, carefully and critically evaluate their own theistic position, and engage their clients, including especially clients who are members of the church, in initial and ongoing dialog about their theism so they can provide therapy in a sensitive, respectful, and ethical manner.

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AUTHOR'S BIO

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A Synopsis and Extension of Thayne and Gantt's *Who is Truth? Reframing Our Questions for a Richer Faith*

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Thayne and Gantt's recent book, Who is Truth?: Reframing Our Questions for a Richer Faith, presents an ancient but revolutionary conception of truth. They compare the ancient Greek conception of Idea-truth with the ancient Hebrew conception of Person-truth. They explore the implications of Person-truth for our faith. They use Person-truth to reframe questions. This article presents a synopsis of the book and extends its implications around the issue of suffering and psychotherapy.

Jeffrey L. Thayne and Edwin E. Gantt (2019) recently published *Who is Truth?: Reframing Our Questions for a Richer Faith*, a deep and penetrating book written in a very accessible style that articulates a most ancient, but revolutionary reconceptualization of truth. Thayne and Gantt present a powerful concept and use it to reframe common questions that Latter-day Saints might have vis-a-vis the nature of God, truth, suffering, and the purpose of life. What follows is a synopsis of the book with an extension of the analysis Thayne and Gantt offer in their book, one that I have pondered at some length and have here taken the liberty to draft.

The foundational concept in *Who is Truth* is that “truth is not a set of abstract ideas, but a living, breathing Person who loves us as His children.” Taking their cue from Christ’s own declaration to be “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), as well as similar scriptural statements, Thayne and Gantt argue that

reframing truth as the person of Jesus Christ (capital “T” Truth, as it were) leads to the hope that “readers will center their faith more on the Savior Jesus Christ and the covenants they have made with God and less on abstract lists of doctrines or beliefs” (p. 16). Indeed, reframing truth as the person of Jesus Christ leads to reframing questions about life. Each chapter concludes with important reframings that seek to enhance faith and invite the reader to a deeper and richer spiritual understanding and relationship with Christ.

In Chapter One, the authors juxtapose “Idea-truth” and “Person-truth”. They show that Idea-truth has its roots in the Greek (and subsequent Western) philosophical tradition, whereas Person-truth has its roots in ancient Hebrew scriptural conceptions. They articulate and justify an understanding in which Christ is the very embodiment, the very reality of truth – a perspective announced throughout holy scripture, both ancient and modern. They contrast

and discuss the two conceptions of truth as follows:

<u>Idea-Truth</u>	<u>Person-Truth</u>
Abstract	Concrete and Particular
Universal	Contextual
Unchangeable	Moral Agent
Passive	Active
Discoverable	Must Be Revealed

In Chapter Two, the authors expand on the ancient roots of each of these conceptions of truth. In the Greek conception, things that are unchangeable trump things that change. In the Greek, abstract ideas trump concrete realities. In the Greek, the gods were bound by fate and the dictates of impersonal abstract law. The authors propose that one major consequence of the Apostasy was the replacement of a dynamic, agentic, relational God with an abstract, unembodied, timeless, formless, and unchanging Being. In the Greek, Aesop's fables represent universal maxims. In contrast, the Hebrew conception proposes that what something does defines what it is. In the Hebrew, Truth is experienced as a lived relationship. In the Hebrew, there is no search for Truth that is distinct from the search for communion with a living, loving God. In the Hebrew, God changes the world. In the Hebrew, right behavior is based on covenantal commitments. In the Hebrew, Jesus' parables are narratives to be lived and re-lived within changing contexts that bring forth new and deeper meanings and possibilities.

In Chapter Three, the authors question whether we should place our faith in Ideas or be faithful to a Person. If truth is a set of abstract ideas best captured in logical propositions, then the essence of religion observance becomes a primarily a matter of adherence to a set of doctrines and the animating question becomes "what do I believe?" If Truth is a person, however, religion becomes a way of living in faithfulness to God with whom one makes covenants and to whom one is to be loyal. Religion is a way of life. The focus shifts from a set of doctrines to our relationship with the Truth made flesh. Person-truth leads prophets to sermonize less about orthodoxy and consensus and more about inviting all to a covenant relationship with God.

Pithily put, the deed is always more important than the creed and the aim of worship is the Living Truth rather than the dead law.

In Chapter Four, the authors illustrate that knowing God and believing Him is distinct from believing in ideas about Him. They emphasize that a testimony is about the experiences we have had with God, His hand in our lives, His goodness, His saving grace and His transforming love. They challenge the idea that faith and knowledge are opposites and propose that the true opposite of faith is disloyalty to a Person. They conclude that we justify our faithfulness through our experience with God. We remember our experiences and it is our history with God that grounds our loyalty to Him.

In Chapter Five, the authors challenge our pandemic itch for absolutes and control. They argue that Person-truth does not give us control and is risky. In the Greek worldview, truth is reliable because it is something that never changes. In the Hebrew worldview, Person-truth is reliable because God is good, trustworthy, and faithful to His children. In this way, safety in life is not grounded in reliable expectations of unchanging abstractions, but rather, safety is grounded in the goodness of God. Goodness is crucial. In the Greek perspective, Idea-truth gives us control regardless of our morality because knowledge is distinct from ethics. In other words, what one knows, the knowledge one possesses is separable in important ways from how one conducts oneself and how one is for and with other people. Person-truth, in contrast, relies on a relationship that depends on our moral conduct and requires that we relinquish control and let God prevail in our lives. While Idea-truth promises the power to exert our will on the world for good or bad (recall the Shoah), Person-truth does nothing of the sort. It is only when we strive to enact God's good will in humility that Person-truth shares His power with us and can truly, fruitfully work through us.

In Chapter Six, the authors explore the nature and meaning of "knowing." Most readers will be familiar with the scientific method for discovering presumably self-existent natural law. By contrast, Thayne and Gantt show that knowing Truth in the very person of Christ comes not by replicable method but through

covenant. We come to know Truth in ways that are sacred, personal, and ideographic. Through covenant, we pledge ourselves to God and must do so to know Him intimately.

In Chapter Seven, the authors powerfully challenge the idea that societies inexorably progress to better states. Idea-truth assumes that society is continually progressing from antiquated ideas to newer, better ideas and that knowledge is cumulative. From this sort of thinking comes the scoff that to reject a newer idea is to be on the wrong side of history. Person-truth treats societal progress very differently, however. In Person-truth our relationship with Truth is our relationship with God and that relationship must be nurtured. Indeed, from this perspective it is easy to see that the Book of Mormon is a thousand-year history of the rise and fall of civilizations directly due to their relationship with God. The Nephite nations' on-again/off-again relationship with Person-truth showed that progress is not a cumulative given and that knowledge and goodness can be lost. Rather than be on the wrong side of history, the question is really whether we are on the wrong or right side of God. We progress when we are aligned with Person-truth.

In Chapter Eight, the Thayne and Gantt explore the meaning and nature of the concept of "authority." Idea-truth establishes authority based on degrees granted by accredited institutions based on knowledge obtained through study grounded by a publicly replicable curriculum that depends heavily on converging rational or scientific consensus. Ironically, even as Idea-truth encourages rejecting appeals to authority as a logical fallacy, at the same time it extols the virtues of scholarly dialogues that actually rely on appeals to authority through minimal peer review, especially in the social sciences where replication is sorely lacking. Few scholars replicate the work of others but accept conclusions based on the authority of the peer-review process. In contrast, Person-truth does not depend on public scrutiny, objectivity, or replicability to establish itself, to ensure its validity. Person-truth can authorize and commission spokespersons in a quiet, sacred way – a way that Idea-truth, as an abstraction, or set of rational principles, can never do. Christ's servants can contradict the consensus of the so-called "experts,"

and are often rejected, denigrated, and punished for going against the grain of popular intellectual or social consensus. But the question remains as to how to determine whether someone is (or has) authority. Thayne and Gantt propose that personal revelation confirms the stewardship of the representatives teaching of Person-truth more than whether their abstract ideas or rational theories are accepted as true or have intellectual standing in a community of experts and professionals. Person-truth allows contextual inspired leadership rather than uniform consistency across all contexts.

In Chapter Nine, the authors take on the true enemy of Person-truth. If Truth is a person, then what of Falsehood? In the perspective of Idea-truth, falsehood is a matter of mind, ideation, and bad reasoning. In Person-truth, however, not only is Truth a Person but Falsehood is as well. Our science does not deal with the personhood of Falsehood. Such things are treated as superstition and bugaboo. The book's authors propose that our great task is not to sort between true and false ideas but to learn to discern the voice of Truth and the disguises of Falsehood, the one who is the enemy of Truth. The question is not what to believe, but in whom to trust, whom to follow. The person of Falsehood is an active destroyer. While Falsehood can ensnare us with falsity, escape comes not by thinking our way out of the snare, but rather by divine rescue.

In Chapter Ten, Thayne and Gantt endeavor to examine the concept of sin. According to the Idea-truth perspective, moral truth is grounded in, or perhaps a product of, a set of universal rules, axioms, or principles. Sin is therefore a violation of these abstract principles and laws, moral prescriptions that not only do not depend on context but which also require sophisticated rational capacities to identify and implement correctly. In contrast, the Person-truth perspective suggests that sin has less to do with complying with universal moral principles, and the ethical codes that seek to articulate them, and more to do with our loyalty to our covenants and relational stance toward God and our fellow beings as informed in particular contexts and situations. Everything becomes personal. It is not because we violate impersonal law that we

have been sinful and feel guilt. Rather, it is because we have violated His laws, betrayed our relationship with the Truth, and broken faith with Him. We have wronged a Person who loves us, and in whose very real and very concrete presence we will feel true sorrow for disloyalty.

In Chapter Eleven, following this reconsideration of the meaning of sin, the authors then offer a reconceptualization of the nature of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Idea-truth leads us to believe that violations of abstract, self-existent moral laws require a penalty for sin. In that view, Christ vicariously suffered the punishments required by impersonal, universal moral law. Such a conception relies on the assumption that the fundamental reality of the universe is found in the existence of certain abstract, unchanging laws that even God must abide and to which He must ultimately be held to account. In the perspective of Person-truth, however, the Atonement of Jesus Christ becomes an effort to reconcile us to God after we have been disloyal to Him. Christ's task is to repair our relationship with God rather than to appease the demands of some unembodied, impersonal and abstract concept of justice. Christ condescends to suffer with us as we mourn and turn again to God. Most notably, the Atonement is seen as an on-going, personal process rather than a single event of the past that occurred in Gethsemane or on Golgotha that infinitely appeased the demands of justice. It is, rather, a patient continual invitation to become at-one with God in the immediate and unfolding context of our lives.

In Chapter Twelve, Thayne and Gantt return again to the world of science and reason. They explain that Person-truth and science are not in fact in conflict. The resolution to the putative conflict between them is to disavow causal statements arising from a form of scientific method rooted (whether explicitly or covertly) in naturalism. Humility is required to move down the hierarchy of explanatory power from claims of causation to hopeful prediction, knowing always that some forms of uncertainty are better than others but never certain. Perhaps scientists could even humbly accept that scientific inquiry can only describe patterns that recur. That is, although we can observe regularities in nature, nothing requires that we believe our descriptions to be descriptions of universal or immutable laws of nature. While God may be a God of

order, nothing demands that His order cannot change. The Person-truth conception then asks us to trust His order, not because He is unchanging or bound by transcendent abstract law, but because whatever order he decrees in context is born of love and His desire for our growth and development.

At the conclusion of their book, Gantt and Thayne provide two very informative appendices; one that more fully examines Greek and Hebrew thought, and one that responds to frequently asked questions, such as: *Isn't God subject to natural Law? What of Justice and Mercy in the Book of Mormon? Doesn't the Book of Mormon describe God as unchangeable? Don't the scriptures describe God's commandments as irrevocable? Don't Modern prophets talk about moral law using Greek ideas? Does the Person-view of truth lead to moral relativism?* Their answers to these and similar questions are both cogent and enlightening.

Reading this book, and considering the analyses in each of its chapters, left me pondering the nature of punishment and suffering. What follows is my attempt to extend the work of Thayne and Gantt by examining the nature of punishment and suffering from the Person-truth view they articulate. I do not know if my extension is accurate and consistent with their conception, but the guiding principle is that whatever God does in our lives, it is personal, motivated by love for us, and individually sculpted to enhance our development. Trusting in the Lord as Truth changes how we interpret our life's experiences. Following Thayne and Gantt's argument, I began to see how scriptural statements of so-called punishment were ideographic, intensely personal, and that God openly accepted personal accountability for his response to our perfidy in our relationship with Him as well as personally supporting us in our trials.

It seems that in the Greek view of Idea-truth, punishment is the result of violating disembodied self-existent laws. Suffering occasioned by sin is, in this view, often characterized as analogous to the law of gravity and sin is said to be akin to jumping out of an airplane without a parachute. There is nothing personal about the suffering occasioned by sinful behavior. Actions simply have consequences, and, thus, under this conception, people simply suffer the impersonal consequences of their choices. But suffering is not necessarily the consequence of sin, although many of

our clients often wonder what in the world that they did wrong to endure the suffering imposed on them. They ask “Haven’t I kept the commandments? Why is this happening to me?”. This is a variation on the question asked of Jesus “And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.” (John 9:1-3 King James Version)

Jesus disavowed that suffering was the inescapable, impersonal result of sin. Our clients may have been faithful, and yet their suffering may not be the consequence of sin. Predation, illness, disability, and accidents are not the effects of sin, but they seem to be the conditions of a fallen world in which entropy reigns and Falsehood is allowed to roam the earth. In the case of the man born blind, Jesus then metaphorically showed that he was the Creator of the earth who was sent from God to heal the fallen world. He used his own bodily fluid (spittle) and mixed it with the dust of the earth (clay) and sent the man to the place called Siloam (lit., “sent forth”) to be healed.

In a similar way, he dealt with the woman taken in adultery in such a way as to testify that he was the pre-mortal Jehovah now sent to save the fallen. As he waited for her accusers to disperse, he wrote on the ground with his finger. This event happened on the temple grounds and the floor was made of hewn stone. As Jehovah had used his finger to write on the stone tablets that Moses had hewn, again, he wrote with his finger on the stone floor of the temple. I wonder whether what he wrote on the floor of the temple was simply the decalogue. Anyone watching would have recognized the characters. It was a powerful testimony that he is God. Jesus said that he did not condemn her but pled with her to go and sin no more. In her case, he showed that he was the Savior who was sent to make us “at-one” with God as we go and sin no more. He was not helpless in the face of natural law and the consequences of her sin. He actively intervened to restore her relationship with God. And, unfortunately, the man who was certainly caught in the very act of adultery with her was hypocritically not brought before Jesus by the indignant accusers and apparently did not

receive the same merciful reunion with God (John 8: 3-11 King James Version).

As I read the scriptures, I see the concept of Person-truth much more powerfully invoked than the concept of Idea-truth and disembodied natural law. When we read of the Lord executing vengeance, we tend to think of it as metaphor, but in the Person-view of truth, it seems to be more literal. I think that we tend to believe that we have become so sophisticated in our modern world that we no longer believe in such an enchanted view of the universe as the ancients did, a cosmos in which some god renders punishment for sin. If the Lord uses a civil war to scourge the nation for its sins, we tend to ascribe the war to other socio-political forces. But the Lord does not seem to be talking in metaphor. It seems, at least to me, to be quite personal. He renders the punishment himself. He is accountable for rendering judgment and punishment and atonement. Both the punishment and the atonement are personal. And, most importantly, I see God taking personal responsibility for punishment and suffering.

Even Christ described his suffering as a personal experience with his Father rather than a moment in time in which all the impersonal disembodied consequences of our sins were heaped upon him. Rather, as we read in the 76th Section of the Doctrine and Covenants: “When he shall deliver up the kingdom, and present it unto the Father, spotless, saying: I have overcome and have trodden the wine-press alone, even the wine-press of the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God” (107). And the angels understand this personal process as well. “And again, another angel shall sound his trumpet, which is the seventh angel, saying: It is finished; it is finished! The Lamb of God hath overcome and trodden the wine-press alone, even the wine-press of the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God” (D&C 88:106).

And Christ avers that our suffering for sin is personally imposed by him.

Therefore I command you to repent—repent, lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not. For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; but if they would not

repent they must suffer even as I; which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men. Wherefore, I command you again to repent, lest I humble you with my almighty power; and that you confess your sins, lest you suffer these punishments of which I have spoken, of which in the smallest, yea, even in the least degree you have tasted at the time I withdrew my Spirit. (D&C 19:15-20)

Nowhere in that statement do we see that the consequences for sin are like jumping out of an airplane without a parachute or the inexorable consequences of the operations of eternally disinterested natural law. To the contrary, Christ is the actor who takes personal responsibility for smiting us and humbling us and saving us.

It can be conceived that there are three basic sources of suffering: consequences of sin (smiting), consequences of the Fall (entropy), or sculpted trials. But, upon reflection, Christ's mercy is the solution to each of these sources of suffering. He atones for sin. He controls the wind and the waves, heals the sick, and even conquers death, the ultimate expression of entropy in a fallen world. And, when our pleas for deliverance from the effects of this fallen world are not met with our desired outcome, he sustains us in our sculpted trials as we let God prevail in our lives.

Elder Richard G. Scott (1995) provided a reframing that dovetails nicely with Thayne and Gantt's chapters. After identifying the need for repentance and trust in Christ's mercy to resolve suffering, he said:

Now may I share some suggestions with you who face the second source of adversity, the testing that a wise Heavenly Father determines is needed even when you are living a worthy, righteous life and are obedient to His commandments.

Just when all seems to be going right, challenges often come in multiple doses applied simultaneously. When those trials are not consequences of your disobedience, they are evidence that the Lord feels you are prepared to grow more (see Proverbs 3:11-12). He therefore gives you experiences that stimulate growth, understanding, and compassion which polish you for your

everlasting benefit. To get you from where you are to where He wants you to be requires a lot of stretching, and that generally entails discomfort and pain.

When you face adversity, you can be led to ask many questions. Some serve a useful purpose; others do not. To ask, Why does this have to happen to me? Why do I have to suffer this, now? What have I done to cause this? will lead you into blind alleys. It really does no good to ask questions that reflect opposition to the will of God. Rather ask, What am I to do? What am I to learn from this experience? What am I to change? Whom am I to help? How can I remember my many blessings in times of trial? Willing sacrifice of deeply held personal desires in favor of the will of God is very hard to do. Yet, when you pray with real conviction, "Please let me know Thy will" and "May Thy will be done," you are in the strongest position to receive the maximum help from your loving Father.

This life is an experience in profound trust—trust in Jesus Christ, trust in His teachings, trust in our capacity as led by the Holy Spirit to obey those teachings for happiness now and for a purposeful, supremely happy eternal existence. To trust means to obey willingly without knowing the end from the beginning (see Proverbs 3: 5-7). To produce fruit, your trust in the Lord must be more powerful and enduring than your confidence in your own personal feelings and experience. (Ensign, November 1995)

Elder Scott's reframing here only makes sense – indeed, it is only really possible – under the rubric of a Person-truth perspective. Each of the sources of suffering are understood and we are sustained in a personal process with He who is Truth.

I teach a course focused on spiritual interventions in psychotherapy in our doctoral program in counseling psychology. As I have pondered and developed this course, I have needed to make it effective for all constituents, believers and non-believers of all traditions. In the end, however, I do share my strong opinion that all development and healing come by power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, whether we know it or not. The task for believing therapists is to become sensitized to the presence of God in the therapy process. It is not necessary to proselytize or testify, at least in the usual sense of those terms, but rather to be sensitive to the divine presence. As an example, I was working with a family after an ugly trauma, a sister-in-law

made a profoundly supportive statement. I immediately felt the presence of Deity in the room. Without using culturally laden language, I asked the family whether they felt it. As the youngest child nodded in affirmation, I asked, "Do you know what that feeling is?" She did not. I told the family that what they were feeling was truth and love. They all acknowledged the feeling and the content. It was a profoundly tender and healing moment in the session. Those feelings that accompany the presence of love and truth are not the effect of disinterested impersonal natural law. It is far more powerful to conceive of those healing moments as being in the presence of a real, living, loving person who is Truth.

How does one become sensitized to the presence of Person-truth in the therapy room? In the course that I teach we explore five components: *Know Thyself*, *Know Thy God*, *Know Thy Client*, *Know Thy Craft*, and *Think About it Already*. In each domain we write and reflect on and share our reflections. We write our history with God. We try to articulate our conception of God. Some students have very direct contact with the Infinite. Some take great strength through the scriptures. Some are softened by music, and some by trials in which they felt divine support. While hearing our colleagues' histories and conceptions of God, it becomes clear that our clients also have their own histories and conceptions of God. The varieties of our colleagues' religious and spiritual experiences become immediately evident and teach us of the sensitivity needed to understand and accept our clients' experiences.

Although I believe that Christ is the source of all development and healing, I do not have to impose that belief. The five components in the course work as well for believers as they do for atheists. Suspended belief or non-belief is an expression of one's history with the idea of God. That is accepted in students as much as it should be in clients. Given those foundations, we then explore how to respond with open eyes and hearts to the varieties of spiritual experiences or non-experiences. And, finally, the process is never finished. We must think about it for the rest of our careers. In light of Thayne and Gantt's articulation of the Person-truth view, it becomes clearer that there is no technique for spiritual interventions in psychotherapy. Rather, what is required is a particular

mindset. It has seemed to me that Thayne and Gantt's ancient, but revolutionary, conception of truth as a person, is a powerful mindset. Those of us who prefer to think in terms of evidence-based practice, something which harks back to Idea-truth, are also apt to think in terms of effective technique. My own doctoral training emphasized that we were "behavioral scientists" more than psychologists. I have questioned my own conception of truth. Historically, I have wrestled with the tension between modern and post-modern views of truth. In the book *Turning Freud Upside Down* (2005), I tried to dovetail discovered, self-existent truth (modern) and constructed truth (post-modern). I thought that by invoking Georg Cantor's diagonality theorem and model of transfinity, I could make both conceptions work harmoniously in a way that allowed for God to have infinite knowledge at the same time that he had a frontier. I still like the idea of nested ecologies of law. But in neither case, was I considering that truth was a person. Thayne and Gantt's Person-truth is an ancient but revolutionary concept which is neither modern nor post-modern.

What does the world look like if truth is a person? How does the universe function if truth is a person? Thayne and Gantt's book opens up an entirely new way to consider such questions. I can hardly wrap my head around it, but it feels warm, immediate and deeply personal when I do. I see it replete in the scriptures and everything has become personal between me and Truth.

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