Testing Theories of Behavior with Scripture

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Testing Theories of Behavior with Scripture
Stephen L. Brower, Ph.D.

This paper suggests procedures for testing behavioral theory with scripture. A theory of self-betrayal (Warner, et. al., 1979) is examined against the series of self-betrayal "strategies" Cain used to avoid the consequences of killing his brother Abel. The theory fits and explains well the behavior of Cain. A second example of testing theory with scripture deals with guidelines for assessing fundamental assumptions upon which theories of behavior are constructed.

Chidester, at the April 1981 AMCAP Workshop, proposed that Warner's theory of self-betrayal provides "the missing link, to a large extent," in the development of a "philosophy of human nature and behavior which is consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ." (Chidester, C. Richard. "An Additional Dimension to Marriage Enrichment: A change of Heart." Journal of the Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists, 1981, 7:3, 9-13, 23.) If Chidester's observation is valid, one could expect to verify it by an analysis of scriptures that underlie gospel principles dealing with human nature and behavior.

It is my conviction and experience that exploring the scriptural roots of theories of personality and human behavior can help one test the adequacy of a theory, expand one's understanding of the scriptures and gospel principles, and aid in formulating more adequate theories. This paper seeks to demonstrate procedures for using scriptures to assess the validity and adequacy of theories of behavior. Two uses of scripture for testing theories of behavior are presented.

The scriptural account of the Lord's confrontation with Cain after he had slain Abel serves as a vehicle for analysis of the self-betrayal theory. Without question, Cain's behavior before and after he killed Abel represents an extreme example of self-betrayal. Therefore, one should expect Warner's theory of self-betrayal to provide means for analysis and an explanation of Cain's behavior.

A behavioral content analysis of this scripture is paralleled with the principles outlined by Warner, et. al. to check the fit of the theory to the scripture. Obviously, this analysis operates on the assumption that the theory, if it approximates an explanation of reality, will be supported by a careful analysis of scripture. For the purposes of this paper, self-betrayal is defined as an individual doing what he feels is wrong. Such wrongdoing is attended by various forms of self-justifying attitude and behavior.

The account in the scriptures (Moses 5:31-39) of the various strategies employed by Cain to avoid the consequences of killing Abel is paralleled by a behavioral analysis of this scripture presented at a BYU Six-Stake Conference, Spring 1977. These in turn, are juxtaposed with the descriptions proposed in the theory of self-betrayal outlined by Dr. Terry Warner and others at BYU (1979).

The purpose of my analysis in 1977 was to provide a set of behavioral indicators or "red flags" that signal the presence of destructive behavior, behavior that is damaging to self and others. Each strategy used by Cain was related to our present behavioral reality. Suggested means for eliminating or changing these destructive behaviors, based on the repentance process, were also presented at that stake conference. However, only the descriptive analyses of the strategies used by Cain are used in this paper.

The Behavioral Analysis

Cain kills his brother Abel, and the Lord calls Cain to account for this behavior. Cain's response includes a number of typical self-protective, yet self-betraying, strategies. They are behaviors we may use ourselves (or have seen others use) when we are refusing to acknowledge our responsibility for various errors, mistakes, sins, etc.

To begin with, Cain chooses to reject and disobey the counsel of his parents and the Lord and to follow Satan. "Wherefore Cain was called Master Mahan, and he gloried in his wickedness." (Moses 5:31, see also verses 18-30.)

In following the scriptural record, it is possible to compare my analysis with Warner's, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scriptural Account</th>
<th>Brower Analysis</th>
<th>Warner's Description of Self-Betrayal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>v. 32. &quot;Cain rose up against Abel, his brother, and slew him.&quot;</td>
<td>Choose self-interest, self-gratification, self-gain behavior over concern for others' welfare, and deceive self.</td>
<td>2. When a person does what he feels is wrong, he betrays himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 33. &quot;And Cain gloried in that which he had done, saying: I am free; surely the flocks of my brother felleth into my hands.&quot;</td>
<td>Lu. deny responsibility or involvement. Act innocent.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v. 34. &quot;And the Lord said unto Cain: Where is Abel thy brother?&quot;</td>
<td>Atten. go on the offensive, using clever strategies to put the other person on the defensive.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cain answered, &quot;I know not. Am I my brother's keeper?&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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The Lord now directly confronts Cain with his behavior and specifies the consequences. "And the Lord said: What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's
blood cries unto me from the ground.” (v. 35)

...and I will require a reckoning for Abel's blood. From his brother's hands I will require a reckoning, for he has cried out to me from the ground. What have you done? (v. 40)

At this point the Lord provides some safeguards to insure that Cain will not be subject to the judgments others might impose. “And I the Lord said unto him: whosoever slayeth thee, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And I the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest he should move from self. or something else is his way. (v. 13)

Cain’s initial strategy after his outright lie is to attack--go on the offensive--with smokescreening tactics and the challenge, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” This is an extremely subtle, manipulative strategy to try to put the Lord on the defensive and attempt to detract Him from the issue at hand. Cain seeks to use the principle of free agency as taught by the Lord to attack the question and the questioner. Cain cleverly tries to focus attention on the aspect of the Lord’s question which he (Cain) seeks to construe to mean that the Lord is asking him to account for his brother’s activities or whereabouts. Cain knows the Lord holds sacred the free agency principle which permits Abel to be free to be wherever he chooses.

And thus he shrewdly reminds the Lord that Abel, not himself (Cain), is accountable to the Lord for his whereabouts and actions.

However, the Lord does not fall for Cain’s strategy. He ignores Cain’s attack and continues to deal with the real issue at hand—that with malice of forethought Cain had killed Abel.

Attacking or going on the offensive is a common strategy used to block further questioning or challenge by trying to divert attention away from the real issue with the smokescreening tactic of attacking the other person. Smokescreening, if successful, relieves the “self-betrayer,” for the time being, from having to deal with the discomfort of directly facing the reality of the lie. It gives the guilty one a sense of being in control and having the upper hand.

This principle seems to me to be missing in the Warner formulation. It could be stated: “To detract attention from the lie or wrongdoing, the person attacks or goes on the offensive by attempting to put the other person on the defensive.” Some have pointed out that perhaps Warner would see this attacking behavior described under his principle number eight: “the self-betrayer insists that something, other than what is right, is supremely valuable.” It would be my contention that “going on the offensive” behavior is such a common strategy that it needs to be clearly and separately specified.

One key to understanding dysfunctional behavior is to explore the roots of manipulative, self-protective, responsibility-avoidance behavior. One will find this kind of behavior associated with those whose lives are characterized by constant reactive strategies aimed at self-protection and self-interest with little or no concern for others. In this example, it seems to begin as a companion to justifying the initial lie. If successful, in the short run, it then allows the self-betrayer to think he has laid the issue to rest, thus deceiving himself into feeling he now will not have to deal with the problem any further.

Examining Behavioral Theory Assumptions

Another example of the use of scripture for testing behavioral theories deals with exploring the underlying assumptions upon which the theory rests. I believe it is safe to say that a majority of the theories of human behavior have as a central focus the explanation of sick, pathological, or dysfunctional behavior. These theories have spawned a wide variety of treatment strategies. They seem to be based first upon an assumption that if one can describe and explain a behavioral problem and if one has a viable treatment strategy, the pathology will be corrected and the patient will be equipped to be a functional, contributing member of society.

The fact is, a client under therapy may no longer exhibit dysfunctional behavior, but there is still no assurance that he has learned how to be functional. Behavioral theories that even attempt to define functional behavior usually do not detail and explain mental health and growth processes with the clarity and precision one finds for dysfunctional, sick behavior.
upon an assumption that human behavior and animal behavior are equivalent. Hence, it is assumed one can build theories of human behavior by observing, analyzing and studying animal behavior.

Consider the implication for behavioral theories in two scriptures dealing with the expected outcomes of human behavior. In the Book of Mormon, Lehi instructs Jacob, his youngest son, on the nature of man and the plan of salvation in 2 Nephi 2. At four points in this chapter, Lehi emphasizes and reinforces the concept that God created two types of organisms-- one to "act" and the other to "be acted upon."

"God . . . created all things, both the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are, both things to act and things to be acted upon." (2 Nephi 2:14) "And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon." (2 Nephi 2:13)

Lehi then teaches Jacob that man was created to act, or be accountable for his behavior. The rest of earth's creatures were created to be acted upon, and thus behave in response to external influence.

"Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself." (2 Nephi 2:16) "And . . . become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law." (2 Nephi 2:26)

Thus we find there is an inherent difference between the nature of man's behavior from that of other creatures. Each behavioral theory can be tested against this fundamental knowledge. Theories that explain human behavior as equivalent to animal behavior distort our understanding of human behavior and thus can encourage the "helping" professions to design and use inappropriate treatment strategies, or to have false expectations as to what constitutes a "cure."

Abraham, in his account of the Creation, similarly reveals and further specifies the differences between the behavior of man and that of other creatures. Abraham reports that a directive was given for all creatures except man to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters . . . and . . . to multiply in the earth." (Abraham 4:22) Later, the Lord's instructions for behavior expected of man included not only the directions given to the rest of creation, but also set additional specific expectations for the way man should behave. "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it, and to have dominion over . . . every living thing . . . upon the earth." (Abraham 4:28, emphasis added)

Thus man, in each of these scriptural accounts, is singled out to behave according to a different and expanded set of guidelines compared to the rest of creation. Man is to act (make rational choices, not just be acted upon or react to the pressures or influences about him). He further is to replenish (leave things in as good or better condition than before), subdue (improve, develop, moderate existing conditions), and have dominion over his environment (manage, organize, direct, have responsibility for or stewardship over).

These scriptures suggest to us that theories of behavior derived largely from descriptions and studies of dysfunctional (reactive) behavior and based heavily on experimental work with animals will have some relevance for animal behavior, for the processes of learning, and possibly for understanding some mentally ill people, but will have a built-in error when applied to functional human behavior as well as to much of dysfunctional human behavior.

The bulk of research into the nature of human behavior focuses upon studies of pathological, dysfunctional, or sick behavior. Comparatively little effort has been expended in the study and definition of healthy, well, or functional behavior. Generally, behavioral theories do not differentiate between animal behavior except possibly as they relate to thinking processes, and even there researchers continue to use non-human primates as a vehicle for exploring and testing learning theories.

The kinds of human behavior that are similar to animal behavior are those behaviors that are generally dysfunctional and destructive for man. Much behavioral research and behavioral theories fail to differentiate these issues: man was created to act, animals to react or to be acted upon; and healthy, functional behavior for man is more than freedom from pathology or dysfunction.

If the scriptures conceive of man as a being who can choose to act, and if current theories of human behavior examine man as a being "acted upon," then one could propose that current theories of human behavior are inadequate and misleading. They are inadequate both for explaining dysfunctional human behavior and for defining functional human behavior. Lacking the underlying definitions provided by these and similar scriptures, present theories of human behavior tell us precious little about how to be functional, to choose, to decide, to be accountable, and to manage and improve self.

I suggest that the self-betrayal theory is an example of one which makes important gospel-related contributions to the theories of dysfunctional human behavior. It is clearly based upon the agency principle found in the scriptures and is consistent with Lehi's definition of the basic behavioral capacity for man, that is, to act rather than be acted upon.

However, it is an explicit assumption in the theory of self-betrayal that when self-betrayal behavior is given up, what is left is the "purity of soul" to act in functional, healthy, non-self-betrayal ways. Similarly, it seems to be implicit in many theories of behavior upon which current therapies are based that by eliminating self-defeating, dysfunctional behaviors one solves the person's problem and he/she is well and functional.

My alternative view is that the elimination of self-betrayal behavior leads one to the point of a new beginning, like repentance and forgiveness of sin leads to a new beginning. It is a necessary precondition to be achieved before one can effectively begin the process for achieving functional growth (righteous living). But it is not a sufficient condition to insure that the processes for functional, productive behavior will occur.

If one calls self-betrayal behavior "losing" behavior,
then the elimination of self-betrayal behavior signals that one is no longer a “loser.” But is one automatically a “winner” at that point? No! To become a “winner” (after the elimination of self-betrayal behavior) one must, “line upon line,” learn, understand, practice, and apply principles and processes for productive, functional behavior. As repentance leads to forgiveness and opens the door to a new beginning, so also, I believe, the elimination of self-betrayal behavior performs the same function.

Once the “purity of soul” or the new beginning is achieved, one is required to both maintain that state of humility and purity and also initiate and struggle to acquire new skills and behaviors leading to productive, functional well-being (joy) for self and others.

For an example of the new processes and skills that come into play after the elimination of self-betrayal behavior, look at a scripture that outlines the skills needed for the righteous use of power (D&C 121:41-44). This revelation specifies at least eleven qualities needed in order for power or influence to be appropriately (righteously) used. The behavioral skills which this scripture reveals one must master include: persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, kindness, pure knowledge—without hypocrisy and guile, reproving betimes with sharpness when moved upon by the Holy Ghost, and then showing an increasing love. Such behavioral skills come not automatically as a result of eliminating self-betrayal behavior. It may well take a lifetime of practice to master the skills needed for the righteous use of power.

Again, I suggest the self-betrayal theory makes an important, gospel-related contribution to the theories of dysfunctional human behavior, but, like many current theories of behavior, gives us little specific guidance for learning how to be functional human beings after we have eliminated self-betrayal behavior.

Functional human behavior processes, too, need to be detailed and specified. Such processes will specify and detail how one can act in order to gain, maintain, and build mental-spiritual health and productive function. These processes will adhere to and build upon the wealth of revealed principles in the scriptures for functional, productive human behavior.