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A Response to Richard Williams: The Alchemist's Apprentice

Lane Fischer, PhD¹

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to Richard Williams' thesis that Latter-day Saint scholars have the wherewithal, duty, and opportunity to redeem western intellectual tradition from the nihilism that is its projected end. Nowhere are the implications of the current tradition more evident than in the social sciences and helping professions. No organization other than AMCAP has a more pressing need to respond to the challenge articulated by Dr. Williams. In my response I want to reflect on my own experience in training, offer some caveats to Dr. Williams' quest, and propose a project to be undertaken by AMCAP.

I graduated with a B.S. and M.A. in psychology and counseling from Brigham Young University. I was schooled in a tradition that integrated empirical, theoretical, and spiritual data. Then I went to the University of Minnesota to pursue doctoral training. I immediately felt the intellectual/social order encroach on which tools I could use and which assumptions I could bring to bear on questions about human behavior.

I wrote a series of papers that observed the process I was immersed in, challenged the assumptions that were foisted on me, and used the scrip-

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tural data that I trusted as a source for answers. I share an excerpt from one paper, written after a year of conflict, because I think it illustrates what is probably a common struggle for LDS graduate students everywhere.

The Science of Behavior and the Image of Man, 1983

I was raised in a religious mode. I still pursue my spiritual training and serve as an elder and teacher in my church. My ideas are based more in the scriptures than in "scientific" personality theory. Yet, I have invested great sums of money and time away from my family to pursue training as a behavioral scientist.

I have experienced frustration with the prevailing intellectual tradition. Whereas my colleagues answer questions by asking, "What do the data say?" (as though data speak with a voice of their own), my first impulse is to ask, "What do the scriptures and the prophets say?" One frustration emerges when the scientific community is disparaging of my use of scriptures as a base for exploration and interpretation of observations.

The type of questions I tend to ask is somewhat different than those of my colleagues as well. When I ask the most basic question of the behavioral sciences such as, What is the nature of humankind?, a myriad of corollary issues emerge. What is the nature of law? What is the nature of freedom? What is nature of truth? What is the nature of good and evil? What is the nature of human responsibility? What is the nature of God? To ask any one of these questions is to ask them all. Another frustration is that the scientific community doesn't deal openly with these issues. It is as though those type of questions are best left to the philosophers and theologians.

I am aware, as Sandra Scarr so nicely stated, that science is merely a mode of agreed-upon procedures which render data for examination. Behavioral scientists must then construct laws and interpret the data. Two problems emerge with her construction. First, even if science is independent, how can behavioral scientists construct laws and interpret data without first approximating answers to those larger questions? Second, how can an agreed-upon human procedure (science) not have implicitly woven into its fabric an a prior image of humans, law, freedom, good, evil, truth, responsibility, and God? If the assumptions and values

woven into the science are wrong and unexamined, and I am giving my life's energies to this science, then I am at great risk of a life of meaningless and error-ridden toil. I have become like the alchemist's apprentice who learns by hard years of service to his master to do nothing.

The paper then attempted to explore the nature of human agency in the context of developmental psychopathology. With perhaps the best empathy he could muster, the professor graded the paper with a brief comment saying, "I can see why you are struggling." In retrospect, I am amazed that I even attempted to influence the thinking of my colleagues and professors at that fine dustbowl. Each paper was greeted with comments that the behavioral sciences were not required or allowed to address those issues. I don't know if I eventually gave up or merely learned to love them and stop fighting. I had to choose between temerity and charity. I wasn't going to get the answers I sought by fighting.

Dr. Williams very cogently challenges LDS scholars to acknowledge the gift of the Restoration and to do the work of creating a psychology that is grounded in the gospel rather than attempting to patch together a paradigm with the material and implements of the apostate alchemist. I am quite excited about such an endeavor. I think that AMCAP is the most logical organization to take on the task. Before proposing an agenda however, I have a two caveats to Dr. Williams' challenge.

1. Don't oversimplify right and wrong.

Dr. Williams is eloquent that the effects of the Apostasy were not confined merely to religion. His reasoning follows that, since Joseph Smith was told that all the extant religions were wrong, all the other components of intellectual life were wrong as well. He further opines that what is needed is a turning of things upside down, a restoration in all things, including philosophy and the social sciences. Rather than a patchwork of hand-me-down alchemy that seems to approximate the truths of the gospel, he yearns for an infusion of truths that will be radically different than the tradition. Anything less than this will be considered all wrong. I have two concerns with this conception of "wrong".

First, while I agree that the Restoration brings startling truths about humankind, I am aware that I see through a glass darkly. Neither I, nor any of my colleagues, have an unadulterated view of this true gospel. Dr. Williams seems to be saying that if a person holds any misconception of extant truths, then the entire construction will be judged to be 100 percent wrong. If such is the case, then we are all 100 percent wrong. An excerpt from a statement of the First Presidency in February 1978 clarifies the workings of our Father in Heaven regarding this issue. God seems to give us a portion of his light and he tolerates less than perfect understanding.

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.

The Hebrew prophets prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, who should provide salvation for all mankind who believe the gospel.

Consistent with these truths, we believe that God has given and will give to all peoples sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation, either in this life or in the life to come.

We also declare that the gospel of Jesus Christ, restored to his Church in our day, provides the only way to a mortal life of happiness and a fullness of joy forever.

Furthermore, there is no end to the truths that await us as we progress and grow. The Restoration was not delivered whole cloth and it is not complete. "We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that he will *yet reveal* many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God" (Article of Faith 1:9).

God works with us, invites us to better lives, and draws us incrementally closer to him. While right and wrong may be polarized, they are not dichotomous (Fischer, 1994).

2. Don't believe that we will redeem western intellectual tradition.

Dr. Williams takes his theme from Isaiah 29 and 2 Nephi 27: 24-

27, in which the Lord promises that:

Therefore, I will proceed to do a marvelous work and a wonder among this people, yea, a marvelous work and a wonder, for the wisdom of their wise and learned shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent shall be hid. (2 Nephi 27:26)

Take very careful note of the subject of that sentence: the *Lord* will proceed to do a marvelous work and a wonder. Dr. Williams quoted the first half of verse 27 in 2 Nephi, chapter 26. The rest of the verse reads:

But, behold, I will show unto them, saith the Lord of Hosts, that I know all their works. For shall the work say of him that made it, he made me not? Or shall the thing framed say of him that framed it, he had no understanding?

I fear that if our motivation is to claim the marvelous work of the Restoration as our own, then we will be categorized with these in Dr. Williams' thematic text.

There is an apostate tradition that exists in our scholarly institutions—even at BYU, I fear—which can impede our progress in this endeavor. We receive professional advancement according to work which we claim as our own. Research and discoveries are judged to be a product of our own brilliance and diligence. Theories and postulates are named after us and our worth is judged by the position of our names on a list of authors with whom we share credit.

If this task is to be accomplished, it will be under the guiding hand of the Lord. If truths are to be given, they will be given by his hand. If we are willing to be instruments in his hands and not take credit for the truths that we are given, then the work may be undertaken. For *he*, not we, will proceed to redeem all mankind, including western intellectual tradition.

Given those two caveats, I propose that AMCAP lay out an agenda for thought and research that will approach the fundamental questions in the helping professions. Among these are: What is the nature of

humankind? What is the nature of law? What is the nature of freedom? What is nature of truth? What is the nature of good and evil? What is the nature of human responsibility? What is the nature of God?

I propose that AMCAP articulate these questions and establish a plan in which each edition of the AMCAP Journal will address one of these topics. With enough lead time, and knowing when each topic is to be addressed, members of AMCAP can ponder, research, pray, write, and submit articles that refine our understanding of them. I propose that space be allotted in each AMCAP conference for dialogue and exploration of these questions. I propose that a future AMCAP conference wholly focused on a synthesis of these papers and dialogues and that a series of monographs be published for general consumption. I propose that we take on this challenge. No organization other than AMCAP has a more pressing need or ability to refine these ideas.

I believe that there has already been much revealed by the Lord both within and outside the scripture that informs us about these issues. Each of us in practice must discern these issues on a daily basis. These observations have not yet been gathered, refined and explicated. I also believe that more will be revealed as we engage in the challenge. As we continue on in Nephi's sermon, Nephi speaks for the Lord, saying:

For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have. (2 Nephi 28:30)

Let us search, hearken and receive more, that we may learn wisdom, and let us do it together as members of AMCAP.

References

- Fischer, L. (1994). Whither thou goest will I go? But I say unto you that ye resist not evil. *AMCAP Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 94-102.