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The Keystone of our Science: Exploring the Premises and Promises of the Book of Mormon for Psychology and Psychotherapy

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In late November 1841, having spent much of the day in council with the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles at the home of Brigham Young, the Prophet Joseph took occasion to impress upon the brethren the central importance of the Book of Mormon to the work of the Restoration. Joseph instructed those in attendance “that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on Earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book” (History of the Church, vol. 4, p. 461). Latter-day Saints are not only very familiar with this prophetic instruction, but also take profound joy in knowing that the Lord speaks to his children in these latter-days through His chosen prophets and that He has provided us with yet another powerful testament of the life and mission of the Savior, Jesus Christ. The Book of Mormon truly is the keystone of Latter-day Saint religion. As President Ezra Taft Benson once noted, “A keystone is the central stone in an arch. It holds all the other stones in place, and if removed, the arch crumbles” and “just as the arch crumbles if the keystone is removed, so does all the Church stand or fall with the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon” (Benson, 1992, p.2). Clearly, then, the Book of Mormon is a book like no other.

Despite the common LDS understanding of the significance that the Book of Mormon has for religious thought and practice, it is not always the case that ordinary Latter-day Saints (in general) or Latter-day Saint scientists and scholars (in particular) have fully appreciated the intellectual significance that the Book of Mormon may have for how we understand and explain ourselves and the world. That is, while most Latter-day Saints recognize the profound impact that the Book of Mormon has in the context of religious history and the prevailing doctrines, practices, and theologies of the world’s various religions, it seems all too often the case that there is a hesitancy among some LDS scholars to seriously engage the Book of Mormon for the possible intellectual contributions it might have for our work as professional scholars and researchers (at least, for those of us in disciplines other than religious studies). Rather, there seems to be a tendency to see the Book of Mormon as primarily, if not solely, a religious document meant to ground religious practice and belief, a work of scripture whose purpose is only to provide spiritual comfort and understanding to those in emotional or spiritual need, and not as a legitimate resource for shaping and guiding academic research, professional practice, or scholarly thinking in our various disciplines.

Richard Williams (1998) has argued, borrowing imagery from the prophet Isaiah, that the message of the Restoration is, for both the religious and the intellectual world, one of the “turning of things upside down” (2 Ne. 27:27); wherein the wisdom and learn-
ing of the world is turned on its head as basic assumptions and accepted knowledge of secular disciplines is brought into question by the light of the revealed word of God. We are in considerable agreement with Williams on this point, firmly convinced that the Book of Mormon contains not only a message and insights that has revolutionized (and will continue to revolutionize) the landscape of the religious world, but which can also radically revitalize and re-envision the world of secular learning by challenging certain widely-held assumptions and perspectives at the heart of our academic disciplines. In other words, not only is the Book of Mormon of profound religious and spiritual significance, it is also of profound intellectual significance—that is, if scholars are prepared to seriously consider it as such.

In this paper, we hope to offer an example of how Latter-day Saint researchers and scholars in academic disciplines might not always be taking the Book of Mormon seriously in their scholarship, and how they might do otherwise. We will do this by highlight some prevailing ideas in the discipline of psychology, and how the Book of Mormon might invite Latter-day Saint scholars to conscientiously dissent from the prevailing tenets of psychological research, and offer an alternative perspective instead. Although there are any of a number of conceptual places where one might begin to explore the possibility of a psychology grounded in the teachings of the Book of Mormon, we will begin this foray into the topic by discussing the general contours of the philosophy of naturalism, and the determinism and moral relativism that are implied in the philosophy of naturalism (at least insofar as it is commonly articulated in contemporary psychological theory and practice). At each point, by way of contrast, we will describe how the Book of Mormon—if we take it seriously—invites Latter-day Saint psychologists and scholars to develop an alternative approach in their theorizing and practice.

We will argue that a psychology grounded in the revealed doctrines of the Book of Mormon is one that embraces not only the fundamental reality of the God of the Restoration, but also His continual, active and dynamic involvement in the lives of His children and the world He has organized for them. Further, we will maintain that such a psychology is one that grounds human nature in moral agency and, thereby, is a psychology capable of articulating a vision of personhood wherein human actions are not taken to be merely the mechanical byproducts of various natural forces operating on material conditions, but are rather fundamentally meaningful and genuinely morally significant. Lastly, we will argue that a psychology that is solidly grounded in the revealed doctrines of the Book of Mormon will acknowledge that Christ’s life, sufferings, death, and resurrection are relevant in addressing all forms of human suffering—and that moral truth and human conscience is not always a mere human construct or natural phenomenon, but is at times a divine bestowal of discernment and understanding. These three examples are just a few of the many ways in which taking the Book of Mormon seriously might lead Latter-day Saints to propose radically different accounts of human behavior and fundamentally different approaches to therapy.

The Scope and Purpose of the Analysis

Because psychology is a large and sprawling discipline, often noted for its contentiousness and lack of theoretical harmony, it would be misleading to say that all psychologists assume naturalism, or would arrive at the conclusion of necessary determinism or moral relativism. Therefore, we will of necessity speak about general trends and sometimes unarticulated assumptions, without always acknowledging more nuanced positions or the psychologists who might see themselves as exceptions to the trends we describe. There is, we realize, a danger in such an approach, insofar as it may strike some readers as being overly critical or nit-picky; while, at the same time, striking others as much too broad and sweeping.

In response to the former, we can only say that the intention of our analysis is not simply to pick at nits or to be critical simply for the sake of being critical. We do not seek to dismiss out of hand all of the valiant and illuminating work of those who have committed themselves to the study of human behavior solely because there is good reason to be skeptical regarding some of their assumptions and claims regarding the fundamental nature of human nature. Oddly, despite the high value that most academics place on skepticism and critical reflection, many seem to experience something akin to an allergic reaction when critical ex-
amination is offered from a serious and believing religious perspective. Indeed, while critical examinations of religious beliefs and practices that are grounded in a secular perspectives and the concerns of professional scholarship are generally taken to be legitimate enterprises at the outset, many academics are less than eager to critically reflect on academic disciplines, their assumptions and theories and practices, from an explicitly religious worldview or forthrightly theistic perspective. However, we believe that a healthy dialogue between mutually respected and respectful partners will do much to further the work of truth in both areas. Indeed, we would argue that just such a dialogue should be a centerpiece of academic life and education.

In contrast to those worried the possible excesses of sustained critical reflection, there are others who may be concerned that an analysis such as the one we propose here will be too general or abstract (or philosophical) to do any specific or practical good. In response, we can only confess that our analysis will and must be very general and sweeping in nature. However, given that what is intended here is a brief exploration of certain basic principles and foundational assumptions upon which more specific details of a psychology grounded in Book of Mormon teachings must inevitably hinge, a fairly general mode of analysis is not necessarily a bad thing—especially insofar as such an analysis may provide some orienting sense of what, in fact, the real issues at stake happen to be. We hope that our brief exploration into the possible contributions that the Book of Mormon might make to a psychology interested in “getting it right”—at least as far as questions concerning the nature of human nature and how persons ought most truthfully to be understood and carefully studied—is that such an exploration will ultimately provide the impetus for more detailed and critically informed work in the future, work that can perhaps shed necessary light on specifics and practice.

Psychology and the Philosophy of Naturalism

The philosophy of naturalism essentially claims that natural laws and/or principles ultimately govern all the events of nature, including our bodies, behaviors, and minds (see Griffin, 2000; Leahey, 1992; Slife, 2004; Viney & King, 2003). Naturalism is, as one historian has written, “science’s central dogma” (Leahey, 1992, p. 379; see also, Hunter, 2007). Indeed, as others have pointed out, “Within Western culture, naturalism has become the default position for all serious inquiry” (Dembski, 1998, p. 14; see also MacIntyre, 2009; Marsden, 1997; Wilkens & Sanford, 2009). Naturalism is, thus, both the ontology and the epistemology (and, in some quarters, the ethics) out of which almost all contemporary intellectual discourse originates, as well as the presumptive context or background framework in which it takes place. According to such a perspective, nature is all there is—or, more accurately, all there is that can be known is that which is natural. Nature is taken to be self-sufficient and natural events are thought to be necessarily fixed and determinate, governed by independent, rationally discernable (via scientific inquiry) but non-intentional (i.e., undirected) laws and principles. Of course, there is nothing in this philosophy that assumes that all such laws or principles have already been discovered or discerned, only that such laws exist and govern all natural events. Ultimately, naturalism does maintain that such events are the only sort of events there are—or, at least, the only sort of events that can truly matter to science because they are the only sort of events that can be measured or known with any degree of reliability.

Psychology as a social science—that is, as a science of the social patterned in its assumptions and methods after the more established natural sciences (Smith, 1997)—constitutes the attempt to account for the meaning and nature of human mind and behavior solely in terms of natural events governed by natural laws (see, e.g., Davis & Rose, 2000; Evans & Rooney, 2008; Heiman, 2001). For psychologists operating within the naturalistic framework it seems clear that since human beings are part of the natural world, “who we are and what we do must ultimately be understood in naturalistic terms” (Dembski, 1998, p. 14). This interpretation of human being in naturalistic terms is not meant, however, to crudely deny our humanity—though such criticisms of naturalism have been made (see, e.g., Craig & Moreland, 2000; Goetz & Taliaferro, 2008; Olafson, 2001). After all, most contemporary psychologists (rightly) see their theorizing and research as a continuation of the tradition of humanistic thought whose roots lie in the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods of Western
intellectual history (Smith, 1997). Rather than denying our humanity, then, conceptualizing psychology as a species of natural science, and committing it to naturalistic forms of inquiry and explanation, is to “reinterpret our humanity as the consequence of brute material processes that were not consciously aiming at us” (Dembski, 1998, p. 14). “Thus,” as noted psychological methodologist Gary Heiman (2001) puts it:

in the same way that the ‘law of gravity’ governs the behavior of planets or the ‘laws of aerodynamics’ govern the behavior of airplanes, psychologists assume there are laws of nature that govern the behavior of living organisms. Although some laws do not apply to all species (for example, laws dealing with nest building among birds do not apply to humans), a specific law does apply to all members of a group. Thus, when psychologists study the mating behavior of penguins, or the development of language in people, they are studying laws of nature. (p. 7)

Indeed, many contemporary psychologists, both researchers and practitioners, would readily agree that psychology is best defined and understood as the scientific study of mind and behavior for the express purpose of discovering those laws of nature which ultimately account for all human action and meaning (see, e.g., Coon & Mitterer, 2010; Passer & Smith, 2010; Pastorino & Doyle-Portillo, 2008).

It is important to take a moment here and consider what the philosophy of naturalism has to say about the nature of God and His involvement in the world. Many scholars would argue there is nothing inherent in the formulation of naturalism described above that necessarily excludes or denies the existence of God (see, e.g., Padgett, 2003). Unlike more encompassing formulations of naturalism (i.e., metaphysical or ontological naturalism) in which the existence of God or any other sorts of supernatural beings is actively denied at the outset and only natural or material entities are admitted to exist, the form of naturalism most often defending in psychology is what is most commonly known as “methodological naturalism” (Porpora, 2006). This form of naturalism is usually thought to represent a more epistemologically modest form of naturalism. As such, methodological naturalism reflects an epistemological view that restricts scientific work to practical methods for acquiring empirically verifiable knowledge, and actively discourages speculation about ultimate metaphysical truths or religious realities. Thus, while it is admitted that individual scientists certainly possess their own individual theological biases and values, methodologically naturalistic science itself is taken to be a fundamentally “a-theistic” enterprise. That is, methodologically naturalistic science is a-theistic in the same way that it is a-moral: the methods of science neither assume nor entail any particular theological or moral views. Science, on this model, is a form of inquiry concerned only with what is demonstrably the case and never with what ought to be or might be the case. Science, according to the tenets of methodological naturalism, is simply a “set of empirical, analytical, self-critical techniques for establishing facts” (Allen, 1995, p. 3). Furthermore, only once the relevant facts of the world have been established in an objective fashion ought one then engage in the inherently biased, value-laden, and fundamentally extra-scientific enterprise of theoretical reflection and ethical or metaphysical speculation (theological or otherwise).

However, the philosophical and theological waters are much deeper and more treacherous here than they might at first appear. As many philosophers of science (see, e.g., Feyerabend, 1988; Gadamer, 2005; Kuhn, 1970; Polanyi, 1962) have shown over the course of the last century, a defining feature of any method—be it scientific or otherwise—is the profound influence that its basic philosophical assumptions and pre-investigatory biases play in both the formulation of the method and the interpretation of the findings it generates. In other words, all methods not only entail certain constitutive assumptions and values, but these very assumptions and values actually give rise to the methods themselves. Indeed, the common notion that objectivity and value-neutrality are and ought to be the hallmarks of scientific investigation is itself a philosophic assumption that reflects a certain set of defining values (Slife & Whoolery, 2006). More importantly for the present analysis, however, is the recognition that theological neutrality as a defining methodological value of contemporary science also reflects a particular value or set of values regarding the nature of God and the relevance of divine activity to scientific understandings of the world (Larmer, 2012). In other words, to make the claim that a sufficient explanation of some event in the world can be offered without needing to con-
sider or account for the possible involvement of God is to already have made the fundamentally non-neutral theological assumption that God is in some profound sense passively uninvolved in the way the world works, and, therefore, conceptually unnecessary to any viable account of it.

In short, then, while the postulation of God's existence might be important for those who want to know the ultimate—though ultimately unconfirmable—"why" of the world and the whence from which it comes, for the methodological naturalist God's existence is simply not relevant to providing an adequate account of how things are in the world. Thus, while naturalism, at least as discussed here, does not necessarily entail any claim about the non-existence of God, it does "affirm that if God exists, he was marvelously adept at covering his tracks and giving no evidence that he ever interacted with the world" (Dembski, 1998, p. 14; see also, Porpora, 2006). God, in such a scheme, may well exist, but if He does, He does so in such a way as to be essentially irrelevant to any understanding of the world and His people. In this way, even when naturalistic accounts of the universe downplay the strictly deterministic and law-like nature of the world and focus more explicitly on the method, it generally assumed that all of human activity, tradition, and social discourse can be accounted for through entirely "natural" theories and explanations—explanations that have no need for the existence of God for them to work. Ultimately, such a God might as well be non-existent because He is, for all meaningful intents and purposes, so profoundly passive as to be entirely uninvolved with the world (expect perhaps, one might speculate as Deists do, at the moment of creation), and, thus, a sort of unnecessary theoretical "add-on," perhaps meant to help religious believers feel better in some way. In the end, though, including such a profoundly passive and uninvolved God in one's scientific accounts really does little to expand our knowledge of the universe or its workings. As one scholar trenchantly puts it, "It remains logically permissible for the scientific naturalist to affirm God's existence but only by making God a superfluous rider on top of a self-contained account of the world" (Dembski, 1998, p. 14). One cannot help recalling the famous French mathematician Simon Laplace's bold response to the Emperor Napoleon when he was asked where the Creator was in his recently published account of the mechanics of the universe: "Sire, I had no need of that hypothesis!"

The Book of Mormon and God's Activity in the World

A sharp contrast to such a passive God can be seen in the understanding of God, and his relationship to mankind and the world, found in the Book of Mormon. The central message of the Book of Mormon is not only that the Creator is not a hypothesis—scientific or otherwise—but an actual person, the living Christ who is continually involved in the lives of His children and the events of His creations, and, indeed, one in whom His children have much need. Not only does the Book of Mormon teach that God created the world for His children (1 Ne. 17:36), but also that He is the "light and life of the world" (Mosiah. 16:9), the very power by which the heavens and the earth and all that are in them are sustained from moment to moment. Indeed, as Alma testifies to the anti-Christ Korihor, "all things denote that there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator" (Alma 30:44). And, again, in the 12th Chapter of Helaman, we read:

For behold, the dust of the earth moveth hither and thither, to the dividing asunder, at the command of our great and everlasting God. Yea, behold at his voice do the hills and the mountains tremble and quake. And by the power of his voice they are broken up, and become smooth, yea, even like unto a valley. Yea, by the power of his voice do the foundations rock, even to the very center. Yea, by the power of his voice do the earth shake; Yea, by the power of his voice do the foundations rock, even to the very center. Yea, and if he say unto the earth—Move—it is moved. Yea, if he say unto the earth—Thou shalt go back, that it lengthen out the day for many hours—it is done; And thus, according to his word the earth goeth back, and it appeareth unto man that the sun standeth still; yea, and behold, this is so; for surely it is the earth that moveth and not the sun. And behold, also, if he say unto the waters of the great deep—Be thou dried up—it is done. (Hel. 12:8-16)

Clearly, this speaks to a God who is intimately involved in the events of the world He has organized. Likewise, in the Book of Mormon we read of a God who is intimately involved in the social and interper-
sonal affairs of His children, directing and guiding, blessing and punishing, inviting and protecting them as they navigate the challenges and vicissitudes of life in the mortal sphere. The God of the Book of Mormon, unlike the absent or passive and uninvolved God of methodological naturalism, is a God who has descended from on high to be among mankind, to suffer as they suffer, to rejoice with them, to experience their pains and temptations, trials and grief so that “he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:12).

The word “succor” employed here by Alma is not a word one hears much anymore—at least, in common daily conversation—but it is one that is rich in poignant imagery in this context. A quick consult of Noah Webster’s 1828 American Dictionary of the English Language teaches that to succor is to “to run to support; hence, to help or relieve when in difficulty, want or distress; to assist and deliver from suffering.” The conceptual and practical implications of this doctrine, not only for an understanding of the meaning of the Atonement of Christ but also for any meaningful account of human psychology and suffering—particularly in the context of healing in psychotherapy—are multiple and deep, and deserve thoughtful exploration by faithful Latter-day Saint psychologists. Suffice it to say that the Book of Mormon attests on almost every page to a God who is familial, familiar, and faithfully involved in His children’s lives, continually seeking them out and inviting them to a more fruitful and intimate relationship with him. We believe that the reality of such a God demands that LDS psychologists and psychotherapists engage in a careful re-examination of their commitment to methodological naturalism, especially if they are to take the Book of Mormon and the Restoration in these latter-days seriously, both intellectually and spiritually.

Psychology and Determinism

One major implication of the philosophy of naturalism—whether endorsed in the extreme terms of an ontological materialism or in more limited purview of the methodological naturalism discussed above—is the assumption of determinism. As typically formulated by psychologists, determinism is the notion that “behavior is solely influenced by natural causes and does not depend on an individual’s choice or ‘free will’” (Heiman, 2001, p. 7). Human beings, in this perspective, are simply natural objects—albeit very, very complex ones—which behave as they do because they must given the particular physical contexts in which they are found and the particular natural forces that happen to be operating on them. While few psychologists believe that all of the determinants of human behavior can be fully identified or known, most of them nonetheless “have faith” that human events “can be predicted, but only with a probability greater than chance” (Goodwin, 2010, p. 10). In other words, there are epistemological limits to our understanding of the determinants of behavior, but at the ontological level determinism is take to be a fundamental and necessary assumption of all legitimate psychological science.

Indeed, for many psychologists, the very possibility of achieving psychology’s central scientific goals (i.e., explaining, predicting, and controlling human behavior) is necessarily predicated upon the assumption of an underlying natural and lawful deterministic order that can be discovered through rational and experimental inquiry, and which is ultimately responsible for all of our behaviors, thoughts, and feelings (Goodwin, 2010; Heiman, 2001). As Slife, Mitchell, & Whoolery (2004) show, “From laws of gravity to principles of pleasure (psychoanalysis), reinforcement (behaviorism), and organismic enhancement (humanism), these types of natural laws and principles supposedly govern all aspects of human beings, including our bodies, minds, and even spirits” (p. 36). To abandon or refuse such a foundational thesis in psychology, some psychologists argue, would bring all rational and scientific inquiry into the causes of human behavior and the nature of human nature to a screeching halt. If determinism is not true, Goodman (2010) asks, “then how can we ever know anything about behavior” (p. 10)? Echoing this sentiment, Heiman (2001) argues:
choose to exhibit a particular personality or respond in a particular way in a given situation. The laws of behavior force you to have certain attributes and to behave in a certain way in a given situation. Anyone else in that situation will be similarly influenced, because that is how the laws of behavior operate. (p. 7)

Ultimately, then, everything that we do, think, or feel—both individually and collectively—is the result of our inescapable entanglement in an “intricate web of causal forces” (Wilkens & Sanford, 2009, p. 102), the pervasive presence and power of which we human beings are (in the best of circumstances) only vaguely aware and about which only a naturalistic science of psychology can teach us.

A classic illustration of this sort of thinking can be found in Stanley Milgram’s description of the nature of social psychological inquiry:

The social world does not impinge on us as a set of discrete variables, but as a vibrant, continuous stream of events whose constituent parts can be dissected only through analysis, and whose effects can be most compellingly demonstrated through the logic of experiments. Indeed, the creative claim of social psychology lies in its capacity to reconstruct varied types of social experience in an experimental format, to clarify and make visible the operation of obscure social forces so that they may be explored in terms of the language of cause and effect. (p. xix)

He further elaborates:

The implicit model for experimental work is that of the person influenced by social forces while often believing in his or her own independence of them. It is thus a social psychology of the reactive individual, the recipient of forces and pressures emanating from outside oneself. (p. xix)

Obviously, as the possessor of such powerful and difficult to obtain knowledge, the psychologist is guaranteed a place of respect in the community. Indeed, it is just such an assumption that seems to constitute the discipline’s primary justification for itself (see, Bakan, 1974 for a fuller discussion of this point).

As was clearly implied in the comments by Goodman (2010) and Heiman (2001) cited above, the only alternative form of explanation to a deterministic one that is even thought possible in this perspective is that behavior—if it is considered agentic in any meaningful way—is nothing more than an impenetrable and inexplicable chaos of random individual whim. Thus, it comes as no surprise that, when confronted with a “Sophie’s Choice” such as this, many psychologists opt for the explanatory coherence and predictive power promised by determinism—an explanatory coherence seemingly attained in the more established natural sciences that psychology seeks to emulate.

Clearly, in the deterministic perspective of naturalistic psychology, the language and concepts of moral agency have no legitimate intellectual place. This is not to say that the experience of agency or conscious will is not taken to be real, or that psychologists deny that persons do actually experience themselves as moral agents. Rather, it is to say that such subjective experiences are usually interpreted as being “illusions,” and, thus, the sort of thing best accounted for in terms of underlying psychological or biological mechanisms and processes (see, e.g., Modell, 2008; Wegner, 2002).

As such, genuine moral agency, and the meaning attendant to it, play no significant role in the contemporary psychological understanding of human actions, their origins, or their meaning because moral agency is held to be merely a subjective experience, the necessitated product of some more objective and fundamental underlying causal process whose specification and prediction is the proper aim of scientific inquiry.

As we noted above, psychology is often noted for its contentiousness and lack of theoretical harmony, so it would be misleading to say that all psychologists are committed to deterministic or reductive forms of explanation (see, e.g., Dawda & Martin, 2001; Sappington, 1990). Some scholars in psychology have persistently argued for the scientific viability and ontological reality of human agency (see, e.g., Baer, Kaufman, & Baumeister, 2008; Baumeister, 2008; Frie, 2008; Gantt, 2002; James, 1897/1956; Kelly, 1963; Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003; May, 1981; Rychlak, 1983, 1994; Slife & Fisher, 2000; Williams, 1992). However, despite the impressive and thought-provoking efforts of such scholars, they have for various reasons remained firmly in the minority of the discipline and made little headway in changing the discipline’s basic commitment to one or another form of deterministic explanation.

Other scholars have sought for a way out of the free will/determinism debate by either advancing some form of compatibilism (or “soft determinism”) or en-
gaging in the intellectual schizophrenia of relegating agency to the sidelines of science because it is incompatible with the mechanical worldview of their discipline, even as they endorse the reality of agency in their personal lives (Baer, Kaufman, & Baumeister, 2008; Sappington, 1990). Neither of these approaches, however, provides for an intellectually satisfying resolution to the knotty problem of the relationship between human agency and mechanical determinism (Shariff, Schooler, & Vohs, 2008). For, on the one hand, despite a long and storied history of argument for the compatibility of necessary determinism and meaningful moral agency, the precise fashion in which genuinely meaningful agency can coexist in a world of natural law and determinate necessity has never really been made clear (Kane, 2011). In the end, moral agency is either reduced to a species of indeterminism—and, thus, by nature inexplicable, whimsical, and non-rational—or it is asserted to be some sort of mysterious ontological “add-on” that occupies some special (though difficult to defend) space in a fundamentally mechanical world. In the former case, while the possession of agency preserves a measure of freedom and responsibility in human action, human acts are ultimately rendered meaningless or absurd, irrational and intellectually indefensible by virtue of their lack of meaningful connection to what would otherwise be relevant events in the world (e.g., one’s past, one’s present context of relationships, one’s embodiment, etc.). And, in the latter case, agency becomes little more than one more unnecessary hypothesis, a sort of pre-scientific hold-over from a less enlightened age—the sort of conclusion it is usually hoped can be avoided in the first place. Of course, refusing to seriously address the question of moral agency by (intellectually speaking) sticking one’s head in the sand—that is, believing in agency or not believing in it depending on whether one happens to be standing in the lab or in the living room—is to commit oneself to serious intellectual hypocrisy.

The Book of Mormon and Moral Agency

For the Latter-day Saint psychologist who wishes to take the teachings of the Book of Mormon seriously, neither of these two options—sloppy compatibilism or naive hypocrisy—are intellectually or spiritually viable alternatives. A central message of the Book of Mormon is that moral agency is not something that one can “take or leave” in the quest to understand human nature and meaning, nor is it simply an “add-on” that can be sprinkled on top of fundamentally deterministic accounts of personhood so as to soften the nihilistic blow of mechanism. Rather, the Book of Mormon teaches that moral agency is fundamental to human nature and that any science, any psychology, any cosmology that does not admit this fact will not only be inadequate to the task of making sense of human beings, but also profoundly misleading about them. Indeed, as Williams (2005) has argued:

Perhaps no question regarding our fundamental human nature is more important than the question of agency. No issue takes us closer to the center of our being. Agency is a genuine watershed issue because the position we take on the issue of whether we are moral agents determines to a great extent the positions we must take on most other questions of psychological and therapeutic relevance. I think it is not an overstatement to say that, in the social sciences, it will be very difficult to get other questions right unless and until we get the question of agency right. Agency is the hinge on which our understanding of all other psychological phenomena turns. At the same time, no concept in the contemporary social sciences has shown itself to be more resistant to clarity, closure, or even consensus than has the concept of human agency. (p. 117)

While space constraints will not permit a full exploration of an approach to human agency that answers the various issues of determinism, indeterminism, and compatibilism, we believe that it will nonetheless be fruitful to point out some of the ways in which the Book of Mormon positions moral agency as fundamental to human existence. Additionally, we will show how taking the Book of Mormon seriously also demands that Latter-day Saint psychologists take moral agency seriously in their theoretical, methodological, and practical endeavors as psychologists, if they hope to make any genuine sense of what it means to be human.

In perhaps no other passage of scripture is the centrality of moral agency to human nature more clearly articulated than in Lehi’s discourse to his sons just prior to his death in the second chapter of 2 Nephi. Here Lehi is teaching his sons that “there is a God, and he hath created all things, both in the heavens and
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In short, as well—but it does not follow that the plot causes the nature of the subplots would dramatically change plots” (p. 127). That is, if one were to change the plot, something akin to the “strong relationship that exists between the plot of a novel and any number of subplots” (p. 127). That is, if one were to change the plot, the nature of the subplots would dramatically change as well—but it does not follow that the plot causes the subplots, or that the subplots were necessitated by the plot. In the same way, we can talk meaningfully about how an individual’s choices might be different had antecedent events or conditions occurred differently without, thereby, implying that the individual’s choices were necessitated by those antecedents.

We share this example simply to highlight that capable Latter-day Saint thinkers have already made some progress in the effort to develop a robust conception of moral agency that does not eliminate a psychologist’s ability to make predictions about human behavior or talk meaningfully about the antecedents of that behavior. Further, it is possible to talk meaningfully about a study of human behavior that does not rely on the sloppy compatibilistic language of “influence” rather than strict causation. That is, it may very well be possible to develop a robust study of human behavior that does not rely on deterministic or causitive narratives—that is, a study of human behavior that does not depict human beings as puppets being controlled by strings of variables. Human beings certainly act in a context that provides meaningful antecedents to human choice, and changes to that context may very well lead to different choices and outcomes—but psychologists can still nonetheless conceptualize human beings as the agents of their actions. Human action does not need to be seen as necessitated by its antecedents. For these reasons and more, we argue that Latter-day Saint psychologists have a number of conceptual tools that they can use to take the Book of Mormon seriously in their theorizing and practice.

**Psychology and Moral Relativism**

It is important to recognize that with the adoption of necessary determinism rather than moral agency as the principle conceptual bedrock from which inquiry in psychology is to proceed, a thorough-going moral relativism becomes all but an unavoidable logical consequence. Once human action is stripped of its fundamentally relational, agentive, and moral qualities, and instead is understood as merely the necessitated outcome of intrinsically non-relational, non-agentive, and non-moral conditions, states, variables, or mechanical processes, it can no longer be seen to be genuinely meaningful or moral in nature. That is not to say that persons would experience their lives
as without meaning, but rather that once a necessarily deterministic account is invoked to explain our behaviors, thoughts, and feelings, then any experiential meaning they might have is rendered suspect, reduced to being merely a subjective matter and, thus, in an important sense, not really real. As numerous scholars have shown, meaning in human behavior and experience requires genuine possibility (see, e.g., Ekstrom, 2001; Gantt & Williams, in press; Martin & Sugarman, 1999; Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003; Williams, 1992, 1994, 2005; Yanchar, 2011). That is to say, for an event (behavioral or emotional or cognitive) to be considered truly meaningful it must be genuinely possible for that event to have been otherwise than it was. Events that are necessarily determined to be as they are, and which cannot, therefore, be in any way otherwise than they are, have no genuine meaning. Such events simply are.

In the case of human behavior, then, only if persons are in some fundamental sense capable of being otherwise than they are, or doing otherwise than they do, is it defensible to say that there is any genuine meaning in what they are or do. Insofar as most psychological theories of human nature deny the reality of moral agency in their accounts of human nature, they cannot but encourage a dangerous and virulent form of nihilism. Indeed, once the conceptual door is shut on the possibility of meaning and moral agency in our psychological accounts of human beings, their actions, and relationships, the door to nihilism would seem to be the only one left open.

Parasitic on an embrace of nihilism is moral relativism. If thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as the social and moral relationships that both give rise to and context for such things, are nothing more than the necessitated outcomes of underlying causal conditions—be they environmental, genetic, or some complex combination of the two—then not only does it no longer make sense to ascribe meaning to human actions, it is no longer legitimate to make distinctions of moral worth among them. For, if one's behaviors are not the sort of thing over which one has any genuine control and in the origination of which one has no real participatory role because they are just occurrences produced by forces outside of awareness and control, then it is no longer possible to claim that any particular act one might commit is in any way morally superior to any other act one might happen to commit (Gantt & Williams, in press; Robinson, 2002; Williams & Gantt, 2013).

As with the question of meaning, the question of moral qualities and distinctions is bound up with the possibility of possibility, with the reality of moral agency. For example, society condemns all sorts of criminal acts, and rightly punishing their perpetrators, precisely to the extent that (and only insofar as) genuine alternatives to committing a given criminal act were available to the criminal in question. The ascription of moral culpability hinges on the fact that the criminal chose to engage in a criminal act rather than in an act of honesty, charity, or self-control. Indeed, if it can be shown that the accused was in some sense unable to entertain alternatives, as in cases of severe mental disorder or external duress, society does not hold them accountable for their crimes. Likewise, if the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings in which people engage cannot be otherwise than they are, and the shaping of how they are is something in which they do not actively participate in meaningful, orignative ways, then these acts are neither good nor bad nor indifferent in their very nature. Such acts simply are what they are and it would be as illegitimate to consider them worthy of either moral praise or condemnation as it would be illegitimate to consider the reflexive eye blink accompanying a sneeze to be worthy of moral praise or blame.

Further, in less strict modes of naturalism—where the possibility of agency is sometimes admitted, even if conceptualized as indeterminism and random activity—the nature of morality itself is often thought to be accounted for by means of entirely natural explanations (see, e.g., De Caro & Macarthur, 2010; Dennett, 2003; Ekstrom, 2001; Strawson, 2008). Psychologists and others have striven to find naturalistic accounts for the moral norms that afflict our conscience. Some psychologists propose evolutionary accounts for the origins of morality, while others find sociological accounts more to their tastes (see, e.g., the essays in Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). In nearly every case, however, moral norms are thought of as either the product of human evolution that only serve the survival interests of the species, or as the product of complex and abstract social forces that—if not also developed in the interests of the survival of the community—were developed to advantage powerful social groups over less
powerful parties. In neither case, however, is the idea of an active, involved, and loving God deemed necessary to developing an adequate account of the origins, nature, or meaning of our moral sensibilities.

Given this reduction of moral truth in naturalistic accounts, it is entirely understandable that “psychology has come to compete for and in large measure usurp the cultural and intellectual space once occupied by religion, literature, and moral philosophy” (Gantt, 2005, p. 53). In fact, Gantt (2005) explains, “It has become commonplace in our society to believe that psychologists not only hold the keys that will unlock the mystery of suffering but also possess the techniques necessary for eliminating it. Because of this assumption, psychologists are often afforded the sort of status and respect that was in earlier times reserved for priests and prophets” (p. 53). Indeed, much of modern psychotherapy seems to revolve around discerning the variables that account for a client’s suffering, and adjusting those variables as necessary to alleviate that suffering. In this way, a person’s moral choices are often sidelined as fundamentally irrelevant to his or her qualitative experience of life. In fact, in many psychotherapeutic traditions it is deemed unethical to bring moral or religious beliefs into the consulting room—the presumption being, at least it seems, that any healing the client undergoes must occur in the absence of any (explicit) moral distinctions between right and wrong.

The Book of Mormon and Moral Accountability

Latter-day Saint psychologists who wish to take the Book of Mormon seriously will notice, however, that the Book of Mormon is laced with moral imperatives, and saturated with warnings about the consequences of moral transgression. This is closely related the issue of moral agency. Lehi, for example, teaches that “the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself” and that “man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other” (2 Ne. 2:16). However, Lehi is at pains to show that this capacity to act, to be “enticed by the one or the other,” is not simply a matter of being free to choose whatsoever one might wish from amongst competing alternatives that have no intrinsic moral distinctions between them, as though moral agency were limited solely to the ability to do whatsoever one might wish. Rather, Lehi instructs his sons that agency is not simply the capacity to do whatever we might happen to want to do, with no moral strings attached and personal preference the sole criteria for action, but that agency is fundamentally moral agency and, thus, is about doing what one ought to do (see also Williams, 2005, p. 118).

For moral agents to know what one ought to do, however, requires access to a source of truth and a world in which to operate where there is a genuine moral topography and the consequences of one’s acts are respected. Thus, Lehi states:

And the Messiah cometh in the fullness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have 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 at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given. Wherefore men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, though the great Mediator or all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself. (2 Ne. 2:26-27).

Rather, to be human is to be at the very root the sort of being who is capable of acting for the sake of genuinely meaningful moral purposes and in truly morally meaningful ways (Gantt & Williams, in press; Williams & Gantt, 2013). Further, our freedom lies in being able to choose between good and evil — a moral distinction that is eliminated in deterministic accounts of human behavior.

Further, the moral norms that so often afflict our conscience do not always have natural origins—that is, their origins cannot be found solely in the chance-ridden processes of evolution or human invention. Rather, the Book of Mormon speaks frequently about heavenly messengers that communicate moral instruction to mankind, as well as about a universal dispensation of moral discernment through the light of Christ: “For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil” (Moroni 7:16). Psychological theories that do not acknowledge the inherency of human conscience, its divine origins, and
our innate ability to discern between right and wrong in our daily activities, cannot fully account for human behavior (such as seemingly ceaseless attempts to rationalize and justify wrong action).

Further, in the world depicted by the Book of Mormon, our actions and choices have inescapable consequences in our lives. While not all unhappiness and suffering in the world is the result of sin (or, at least, the sin of the afflicted party), it does seem that the Book of Mormon teaches that sin often leads to suffering (see, e.g., Alma 41:10-11). It may very well be that some of the distress for which many people seek the help of psychologists can (and ought to) be addressed in moral terms. Further, the Book of Mormon strongly implies that seeking communion with God ought to be a first step in addressing and responding to the suffering of others, regardless of the source and cause of that distress. Indeed, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland may have articulated one of the implications that the Book of Mormon has for the discipline of psychology (were we to take the Book of Mormon seriously) when he taught:

Are you battling a demon of addiction – tobacco or drugs or gambling, or the pernicious contemporary plague of pornography? Is your marriage in trouble or your child in danger? Are you confused with gender identity or searching for self-esteem? Do you—or someone you love—face disease or depression or death? Whatever other steps you may need to take to resolve these concerns, come first to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Trust in heaven’s promises. In that regard Alma’s testimony is my testimony: “I do know,” he says, “that whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions.” (Holland, 2006, p. 70)

That is, while not implying that all emotional and mental distress or suffering is the consequence of sin on the part of the sufferer, we can still readily acknowledge that Jesus Christ, His life, death, and resurrection, is relevant in addressing all forms of suffering in this world. The Book of Mormon teaches that God condescended to become man (1 Nephi 11:26) and suffered “pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind,” so that, as noted earlier in this paper, he might know “how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11-12). We do not believe that we can take the Book of Mormon seriously and at the same time relegate Christ and His suffering to the sidelines of psychotherapy theory or practice.

A Quick Word about the Natural Man

Clearly, any psychology grounded in the truth claims and intellectual insights of the Book of Mormon must ground itself in the reality of moral agency and, thereby, reject the presumption that human beings can be adequately studied and accounted for by means of fundamentally naturalistic or necessarily deterministic forms of inquiry and explanation. Likewise, any Latter-day Saint wishing to take the Book of Mormon seriously as an intellectual guide for psychological study must also be willing to radically rethink the very foundations of his or her science, its aims, implications, and basic conceptions of human nature in light of the Book of Mormon’s unrelenting claims that moral agency is not only central to human existence but to the very plan of salvation itself. Perhaps, given the relativistic implications that inherently attend any psychology grounded in the philosophy of naturalism and necessary determinism, it is no surprise that Elder Boyd K. Packer (2004) remarked that “The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior” (p. 70).

We have occasionally heard the argument advanced that despite the significant differences between the grounding assumptions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the theories of mainstream psychology, the Gospel does not so much function to replace or overturn secular psychology so much as it provides needed qualifications to an otherwise limited perspective. In other words, secular psychology is reasonably accurate in its account of human nature—or, at least “good enough” insofar as it goes—but is limited somewhat because its findings apply only to the “natural man” (Mosiah 3:19) and not to the humble and penitent follower of God who has been “spiritually born of God” and experienced a mighty change of heart (Alma 5:14). The argument here seems to be, as Smith and Draper (2005) suggest, that “unlike many other doctrines of the gospel, the scriptural portrayal of the natural man” does not seem to conflict with the way human nature is depicted in many of the major theories of psychology, which often view humans as determined by bi-
ology or history” (p. 186). Indeed, as they also point out, “one cannot readily imagine a better description of fallen man’s tendencies than stimulus-response, stimulus-response” and that “extensive study of the natural man could very well lead one to believe that agency is illusory, truth is relative, and meaning is contextual when not entirely irrelevant” (Smith & Draper, 2005, pp. 186-187). Accordingly, mainstream psychology is “the study of the natural man” — and legitimately so — but is restricted somewhat in its scope and, therefore, somewhat incomplete because “it has not yet considered our divine origin and potential” (Smith & Draper, 2005, p. 187, italics in the original).

We believe, however, that generous defenses of contemporary psychological conceptions of human nature, and the theories and treatments that flow from such conceptions, may be based on an overly hasty reading of King Benjamin’s statements about the natural man that are found in the Book of Mosiah. In Mosiah 3:19, one of the more famous scriptural passages in the Book of Mormon, we read:

For the natural man is an enemy to God and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.

Easily the most striking thing about this verse — at least in relation to the present analysis — is the central role that moral agency plays in King Benjamin’s description of the “natural man.” In stark contrast to what one finds in much of contemporary psychological theory, there is no mention here of the natural man being a natural object compelled to act as he does (i.e., selfishly, immorally, etc.) by natural laws or the deterministic forces of biology or culture. Rather, for King Benjamin, the natural man is defined from the outset in terms of willful rebellion, disobedience, and pridefulness — all of which are fundamentally agentic and moral events. After all, one cannot genuinely rebel or disobey unless one can just as well obey or conform. While the natural man is defined here as an enemy to God, it is not the case that we must read into this passage of scripture that man is an enemy to God by his very nature. Rather, King Benjamin states that it is by virtue of the Fall of Adam that man has become as he chooses to be.

The fundamental reality of human nature presumed throughout King Benjamin’s discourse is moral agency. Note, for example, how he teaches that the natural man is and will always be an enemy to God “unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit” and “putteth off the natural man” (Mosiah 3:19, emphasis added). Yielding oneself to the enticing and persuasion of another—in this case the Holy Spirit—is something only moral agents can do. Natural objects subject to the compelling forces of natural laws and deterministic processes do not yield to invitations — no matter how complex or sophisticated their chemical interactions and organic composition might happen to be — because such objects are capable only of responding as they must in consequence of the causal forces and conditions operating on them and governing them. To yield, to submit, to be willing to submit, to be enticed by, or to “putteth off” what one is doing (i.e., rebelling against God), on the other hand, requires moral agency and possibility, genuinely meaningful relationships and a vibrant moral context in which such relationships can arise and flourish.

The main point here, then, is that psychology — at least as found in its mainstream and more popular contemporary formulations — is NOT the study of the natural man and does not embody simply a limited perspective that is otherwise viable quite simply because naturalistic psychology has not even managed to get the nature of the natural man right in the first place. In its embrace of the philosophy of naturalism, and its subsequent rejection of moral agency as fundamental to human nature, contemporary psychology is not so much the study of the natural man as it is the study of the natural man from the sinful and false perspective of the natural man. That is, the very psychological theories we find scattered across the landscape of contemporary social science, assuming necessary determinism, psychological egoism, radical materialism, atheism, nihilism, and moral relativism as they do — and as the naturalistic perspective entails — are precisely the sort of accounts of human beings that one would expect to find being championed by a rebellious mankind seeking to evade the moral responsibility incumbent in our mortal existence as moral agents.
The argument we are making here should not be seen as advocating the wholesale rejection of the findings and insights of psychologists and other social scientists, nor should it be read as demanding a full-blown and entirely unique LDS psychology and psychotherapy. Rather, we wish only to draw attention to the fact that the Book of Mormon contains certain basic and significant truth claims about the nature of human nature and that LDS psychologists would do well to carefully and deeply consider such claims as they evaluate rival claims of the naturalistic psychologies in which they have been trained. Such consideration would seem to require, at the very least, a thoughtful and penetrating sifting of theories, methods, and practices that are founded upon (often hidden) naturalistic assumptions that deny or minimize the reality of moral agency and meaning. Somewhat more expansively, it may also require the formulation and championing of alternative modes of research and practice that are not only more attentive to the fundamentally moral and meaningful nature of human agency, but which also rigorously articulates a genuinely theistic framework within which to approach the study of human behavior (for examples of initial forays in this direction, see Coe & Hall, 2010; Jones & Butman, 2011; Larmer, 2012; Slife, Reber, & Lefevor, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we argue that Latter-day Saint psychologists who take the Book of Mormon seriously will highlight in their work: (1) God’s activity, particularly in the world of human affairs; (2) the centrality of agency in their accounts of human behavior; (3) man’s moral accountability and the role that Christ and His life and suffering can play in therapeutic healing. This article has really only begun to scratch the surface of the intellectual possibilities for psychology that can be found in the Book of Mormon. We believe that the Book of Mormon has yet much to teach psychology about the nature of human relationships, the sources of religious knowledge and practice, the limits and susceptibilities of human reason, the relationship of forgiveness to psychological and emotional healing, and the proper aims of our motives and desires, among many other things. For example, we believe that the Book of Mormon radically challenges widespread disciplinary and cultural assumptions that human behavior is fundamentally grounded in psychological egoism, or that religious faith is a matter of “mere belief” absent legitimate evidence and that scientific reason produces the only form of reliable knowledge, or that personhood can be adequately accounted for as the mere byproduct of brain function and evolutionary genetics. A defense of such assertions, however, must be left for another time. Suffice it to say that the Book of Mormon truly is a book like no other, and as such demands the most careful and respectful attention from LDS scholars regardless of their particular discipline of study—and not only for its spiritual insights and truth, but also for its intellectual possibilities and depth. Echoing Brother Joseph, the Book of Mormon truly is “the most correct of any book on Earth” and abiding by its precepts will not only bring one “nearer to God” but will also bring them nearer to themselves.

References


