Book of Mormon Premise in Psychology and Psychotherapy: A Unique Approach?

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Reading Gantt, Wages and Thayne’s (2014) “The Keystone of our Science: Exploring the Premises and Promises of the Book of Mormon for Psychology and Psychotherapy” was something like a breath of fresh air for me, and I am pleased with the opportunity to write a response. I appreciated the unapologetic and yet scholarly manner in which the authors placed the Book of Mormon at the center of their proposed framework for psychology and psychotherapy. I understand that these authors might be considered part of the “choir,” but from my perspective it is about time that psychologists (and not just LDS or religious ones) begin to openly and honestly acknowledge the values that inescapably structure their work. Religious psychologists should no more be ashamed of how their beliefs—about human nature and relationships, the purpose of life, the possibility of change, etc.—inform their work any more than the psychoanalytic, behavioristic, humanistic, or otherwise naturalistic psychologists are ashamed of their foundational beliefs.

In my opinion, the authors made good use of their available space by articulating some of the dominant assumptions of naturalistic psychology and presenting alternatives derived from, or at least compatible with, Book of Mormon (and thus LDS) beliefs. Their approach was necessarily somewhat general, as they acknowledged, but as the authors intended, it does provide a good “conceptual [place] where one might begin to explore the possibility of a psychology grounded in the teachings of the Book of Mormon” (p. 4). Accordingly the authors considered three pervasive assumptions in psychology: philosophical naturalism, (its attendant) determinism, and moral relativism; and contrasted these with three incompatible alternatives supported by Book of Mormon doctrines: God’s activity in the world (theism), moral agency, and moral accountability. They also included an excellent exploration of the meaning of the “natural man” as described in the Book of Mormon, contrasted with psychological assumptions about human nature.

Other contributions of the article by Gantt, et al. (2014) might include (but of course are not limited to) opening a dialogue on the topic, providing a framework for LDS psychologists that is compatible with their core beliefs, and providing an opportunity to flesh out, challenge, and push some of these ideas a bit farther. I appreciate the opportunities thus presented and so will make use of my response by employing the following question in an effort to explore further...
some of the topics raised by the authors: “How is this a uniquely Book of Mormon approach?” I will be drawing on many of the same Book of Mormon verses highlighted by Gantt et al., but hopefully considering them through the lens of this question will yield additional insights. Exploring ways in which the principles outlined by Gantt et al. might be more or less unique, as described in the Book of Mormon, might help clarify how this approach could make a difference in addressing the very old tensions between naturalistic and theistic assumptions about human nature, development, and healing.

How is this a uniquely Book of Mormon approach?

I do not ask this question to imply that the approach described by Gantt et al. (2014) must draw on doctrines unique to the Book of Mormon in order to be legitimately called “a psychology grounded in the teachings of the Book of Mormon” (p. 4). There are other reasons than creating a uniquely LDS psychology for supporting theism, moral agency, and moral accountability with teachings from the Book of Mormon—for example, to insure compatibility of our work with our beliefs and thus avoid “sloppy compatibilism or naïve hypocrisy” (Gantt et al., p. 18). It might also help some avoid the years of angst (experienced by myself) associated with being a serious theist working in a predominantly non-theistic, if not atheistic, field.

I ask the question because I think it might be useful in fleshing out the foundational beliefs underlying this approach, and perhaps pushing these ideas a bit farther. One does not have to look far to find serious theists outside of the LDS faith who believe strongly in moral agency and accountability. In spite of the influence of Calvinism, many of our Protestant neighbors hold not only to the serious theism inherent in Christianity (if Christianity is taken seriously), but also to a belief in moral agency and accountability. And although they may vary in the degree of emphasis placed on God’s ongoing activity in the world, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and some religions that grew up farther to the East tend to acknowledge if not emphasize moral agency and accountability.

One response might be: Great! Then a psychology grounded in these teachings from the Book of Mormon might speak to a wider audience and not always “[remain] firmly in the minority” or “make little headway in changing the [discipline]” (Gantt et al., 2014, p. 17). Relegation to the fringe might be a real possibility if this approach were uniquely “Mormon.” But illustrating the possibility of widespread agreement with the principles highlighted by Gantt et al. is also not the primary intent of my question. I want to dig a bit deeper into these teachings from the Book of Mormon to find out ways in which they might indeed be unique in their ability to: 1) help heal theisms and theists that have arguably been weakened by their long association with naturalistic science and psychology, in ways that more common formulations of these ideas have not, and 2) make inroads with the same healing influence to a world and people long saturated with naturalism and naturalistic psychology.

I believe the Book of Mormon is uniquely designed to challenge the naturalistic assumptions prevalent in our society for at least two reasons: First, it was written for our day (Mormon 8), when miracles (vs 26), the power of God (v. 28) and accountability would be denied (vs. 31). Even in the modern Christian world, including among LDS people, these truths are often downplayed or misunderstood. For example, miracles are often believed to be rare supernatural (outside of nature) incursions into the natural world from an otherwise separate spiritual reality. The power of God is often relegated primarily to a first cause, such as the creation, with a mechanistic nature largely running on its own after an initial act of God. And accountability is often downplayed through a misunderstanding of love, grace, and forgiveness. Second, as President Benson taught (Benson, 1988), the Book of Mormon brings people to Christ both by testifying of Christ and by exposing anti-Christ philosophies of the sort highlighted by Gantt et al. (2014). So with the intent of further exploring unique ways in which the Book of Mormon challenges these naturalistic philosophies, I use the remainder of my allotted space to dig a bit deeper into theism, moral agency, and accountability as described in the Book of Mormon.

Theism (and non-dualism)

Gantt et al. (2014) have articulated well the Book of Mormon doctrine that “the Creator is not a hypothesis… but an actual person, the living Christ who is con-
tinually involved…” (p. 11). There are many throughout the world who embrace this theistic premise, but a closer look at how it is described in the Book of Mormon might help us understand unique ways in which the Book of Mormon challenges naturalistic alternatives.

In the Book of Alma (chapter 30) we find an interesting dialogue that seems to prefigure some of the recent debates between the “new atheists” and believers. Korihor is brazen in using naturalistic arguments in a predominantly theistic society. It seems unlikely that such arguments would emerge in the imagination of a young Joseph Smith in the context of the religious fervor in which he found himself in the early 1800s, but a brief internet search today will reveal an abundance of such arguments—supporting the idea that this book was “written for our day” (Benson, 1988, p. 58; see also Mormon chapter 8).

Korihor’s arguments centered on the idea that one cannot know that which is not experienced with the physical senses, prefiguring today’s narrow empiricism, and he relegated religious belief to the “effect of a frenzied mind” (verse 16). This is a psychological claim! A similar claim was made by the likes of Freud, who described religious belief as “a system of wishful illusions” analogous to a collective “neurosis” (Freud, 1961, p. 43). Skinner was only slightly kinder in describing religious views as a function of positive and negative reinforcement, with God and heaven being simply an imaginary personification of positive reinforcement, and hell and the devil a personification of punishment (Skinner, 1953).

From his naturalistic beliefs, Korihor also derives a philosophy of living, pointing to some of the possible implications of naturalism for contemporary applied psychology:

Every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength; and whatsoever a man did was no crime” (verse 17)

We see in Alma’s response, a potential pathway for bringing healing to clients and to a discipline long steeped in philosophies similar to Korihor’s. Alma’s response contrasts both with Korihor’s naturalism and with the view, prevalent among many modern theists, that the present world is so fallen as to make it quite distant from spiritual realities. This latter assumption slides toward the deistic belief that God is no longer involved with the world, and the dualistic idea that the spiritual and physical realms are so separate that interaction between them is rare and inexplicable at best, or perhaps non-existent. These influential philosophies, deism and dualism, which seek to reconcile naturalism and belief in God by granting each its separate space, have been described as little more than functional atheism (Slife & Reber, 2009; Richardson & Slife, 2013). In the words of Gantt et al. (2014), such a deistic or dualistic 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” (p. 11). In contrast, Alma claims:

Thou hast had signs enough; will ye tempt your God? Will ye say, Show unto me a sign, when ye have the testimony of all these thy brethren, and also all the holy prophets? The scriptures are laid before thee, yea, and all things denote 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. (verse 44)

In Alma’s view, God’s activity is inseparable from the material universe as well as lived experience. God speaks to humankind—to Korihor’s living brethren as well as to prophets as recorded in scripture—and created and upholds the universe as evidenced both in its existence and continuous motion.

Alma also links his theistic beliefs to a philosophy of living, which includes service on behalf of others without expectation of monetary reward, a valuing of truth, and rejoicing in the joy of others (verses 33-34). Korihor’s philosophy of living is focused on management of the self, whereas Alma’s is focused on service to others. Alma’s theism highlights the tendency of belief in a divine Father, who both transcends and unites mortal beings, to bring us out of ourselves.

This contrast in worldviews does not require the therapist or theoretician to preach one worldview or the other to his or her non-believing clients or students. However, there is nothing to prevent us from articulating these contrasting worldviews and their implications for living to our clients, students, or colleagues. Those we associate with are then equipped to consider or adopt theistic alternatives if they so
choose, whereas a thoroughly naturalistic psychology obscures such an alternative. This method of juxtaposing alternative worldviews and their implications for living can, of course, be derived from other sources outside of the Book of Mormon. However, it is rarely articulated in so clear and plain a fashion.

When working with clients, students or colleagues who may be less antagonistic to religious belief, the lessons we can derive from the Book of Mormon become increasingly unique when taken as a whole. Speaking to King Lamoni, whose mind had been opened by Ammon’s dedicated service (his theistic philosophy of living), Ammon searched for common beliefs that would facilitate communication and understanding. “Believest thou that there is a God?” Ammon asks (Alma 18:24). Lamoni responds that he doesn’t understand the question. But Ammon has done his homework. He is culturally literate. Using the terminology of his “client”, Ammon rephrases the question: “Believest thou that there is a Great Spirit?” (verse 26).

On receiving an affirmative answer, Ammon proceeds to build his bridge of influence and ultimately healing: “This is God” (verse 28). He continues building on and extending Lamoni’s belief, not only in the existence of God, but also in an active God whose “Spirit dwelleth in me, which giveth me knowledge, and also power according to my faith and desires which are in God” (verse 35).

Rarely do we find this sort of ecumenical building on common beliefs across diverse faith traditions. Even though common ground in philosophies of living has been found and emphasized across theistic traditions, the idea that the “other” is worshipping a different or even false god remains prevalent. Atheists have capitalized on such divisions to undermine confidence in theistic approaches. In order to provide a convincing alternative to the prevalent naturalism in the world, it would be valuable for theists to follow Ammon’s example and build on common beliefs—creating a more unified voice and vocabulary.

Outside of a religious example, such as the above, the technical aspect of this bridge-building approach is not foreign to psychologists who are often skilled in beginning with what clients, students, or colleagues know and believe before attempting to expand those beliefs. Drawing theistic understandings into this dynamic process may begin to illustrate the potential strength of using the Book of Mormon as a unique “keystone of our [psychological] science” (Gantt et al., 2014).

Further, and perhaps even more unique, possibilities in this regard are revealed in Book of Mormon accounts of how prophets address people who already share beliefs, but who seem hampered by fears, doubts, or apparent tensions within their faith. As I hinted above, some of those tensions may result from the notion that spiritual things are separate from temporal things. This view, followed to its logical end, might suggest to some that although God exists he is likely so far removed from us as to have little concern for our personal struggles. This belief prevents many from fully drawing on God’s power of healing and at-one-ment (re-union).

If spiritual things are so separate from temporal, how can I ever be at one within myself—mind, spirit and body—much less with others? Nephi’s brothers believed in God, but had a difficult time imagining that God would be interested in their personal questions and struggles (1 Nephi 15:8-9). They also apparently struggled to understand the relevance of spiritual things for their temporal existence, which might have caused them to ask whether Nephi was speaking of only spiritual realities, or whether his explanations also included “things which are temporal” (1 Nephi 15:31). Nephi responds in part that he was speaking of things “both temporal and spiritual” (verse 32), refusing to buy in to an absolute division of these aspects of reality. He also has reminded them:

Do ye not remember the things which the Lord hath said?—If ye will not harden your hearts, and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you. (verse 11)

God is described as imminent, responsive; and spiritual and temporal realities as interwoven. This latter idea is expounded in the Doctrine and Covenants (29:31-34), where all things are described as spiritual unto God, reminiscent of Alma’s claim that all things testify of God. There can be no serious dualism or deism in this framework; God is readily accessible for the process of healing as well as learning and understanding. With the combination of these elements of truth about God and spiritual realities—including insights into how we might speak about them with people with
whom we share beliefs as well as those who believe differently—we may be approaching a psychology uniquely grounded in the Book of Mormon.

**Moral agency (and accountability)**

Testimony of the existence and nature of moral agency and accountability is indeed one of the gems of the Book of Mormon, and although an emphasis on these principles can indeed be derived from other sources, it is rarely so clearly articulated. For example, Bible-only believers have debated the nature of human agency for centuries and there remain many who profess to believe firmly in the Bible and yet largely deny moral agency. Some Christians support the notion that an individual is saved by their choice to exercise faith in Christ, which includes obedience to his commandments. Others assert that humans have little if anything to say about whether they are saved or damned, the choice is God’s, not ours (e.g. Calvinist).

Gantt et al. (2014) link a belief in moral agency to the Book of Mormon assertion that human beings are “free to act” (2 Nephi 10:23) in at least one regard: “to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life.” This assertion that agency exists is helpful in anchoring a psychology compatible with the Book of Mormon, but it may not go far enough in describing an approach that is uniquely grounded in the Book of Mormon.

A closer look at agency in the Book of Mormon reveals an astonishingly rich understanding of the relationship between agency and determinism, and among antecedents, choices and consequences. The Book of Mormon can be interpreted as describing three aspects of what might be called a type of determinism: 1) Some things are created to be acted upon, 2) Some antecedents are predetermined from the beginning, but these fixed and predetermined antecedents enable, rather than constrain agency, and 3) consequences are inescapably determined by actions—even though those consequences apply to agentic beings (the Law of Justice). Rather than being set up as mutually exclusive descriptions of reality, agency and determinism in the Book of Mormon are described as co-constituting one another.

The first aspect of Book of Mormon determinism mentioned above describes a contrast between things that were created to act, and things that were created to be acted upon (2 Nephi 2:14). This description fills in a conceptual hole that exists when either agency or determinism are described as mutually exclusive descriptions of the whole of reality. In fully deterministic accounts, there are certainly things being acted upon by causal antecedents, but the antecedents are themselves described as pre-determined—as things acted upon by other acted upon things. So there is a kind of infinite regression of non-teleological causality with no agent. Everything in the universe is rolling around being acted upon, and only incidentally (or accidentally) “acting” upon other things. We essentially have effects acting upon effects accidentally, which is really no meaningful action at all—and no meaningful cause. There are things to be acted upon, but nothing to act upon them in any meaningful sense.

A fully agentic universe has the reverse problem, everything is acting and nothing is being acted upon. If even the rocks might choose to respond to or resist what could be no more than persuasive attempts to fling them, we would have an interesting universe indeed—but it would be quite different than the one we currently observe. In reality we observe exactly what the Book of Mormon describes, things that act, and things that are acted upon. In the former we find agency, in the latter determinism; these things acted upon have no other options available to them. This distinction is described also by Isaiah (10:15) and reflected in 2 Nephi (20:15) where the Lord asks rhetorically, and almost humorously, whether axes and saws and staffs can act against the human agents that use them. However this simple contrast between agentic and determined things becomes more complicated when we understand that the Isaiah metaphor is using these “acted upon” objects to symbolize humans who try to resist God’s power (e.g. the Assyrian king). At the same time the agentic human wielding the ax, saw and staff is used to symbolize God. One begins to understand the apparently irreconcilable conflicts, even confusion, among Bible-only believers regarding agency and determinism as they apply to the salvation of the human race.

Here the Book of Mormon brings much needed clarity by describing ways in which actions are in some sense both freely chosen and pre-determined by antecedents, and ways in which the truly agentic actions
that follow these antecedents result in predetermined consequences. The agency that takes place in between pre-determined antecedents and pre-determined consequences is not unlimited, but it is the fulcrum of meaningful existence. Little is said about particular "lifestyle" choices. The Book of Mormon centers agency on what can be described as a single but enormous choice: that between life and death (2 Nephi 10:23), or between atonement and separation and isolation.

This choice is alternatively described as being between liberty and captivity (2 Nephi 2:27), which helps clarify the meaning of "life" and "death" and provides greater insight into the relationship between agency and determinism. Captive, or dead, things cannot choose; they have no liberty. Free, or living, things can choose; and thus remain in the category of things that act. In this sense, the Book of Mormon teaches that the question of whether or not human action is determined or agentic depends on a choice. Nephi suggests that we are able to choose between agency (life) or determinism (death).

In this description we find a rather ingenious solution to the agency versus determinism problem, echoed in William James’ deceptively simple decision (Perry, 1935/1974):

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier’s second Essais and see no reason why his definition of free will—the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts’—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will. (p. 323).

This view contrasts with the deterministic unconscious forces of psychodynamic theory, the deterministic environment of Thorndike and Skinner, and perhaps even the ubiquitous (and so in some senses deterministic) self-actualizing tendency described by the humanists. James humorously chooses to believe at least "until next year" that the choice to sustain a particular thought when others are possible is not an illusion. If James can choose to believe in agency, it exists. If he can choose to deny it, it still exists. But in choosing to deny one’s ability to choose, one would essentially have to "say that the sun does not shine while he sees it" (Smith, 1965, p. 358)—which may be perhaps one of the most troubling descriptions of captivity and death.

This description of the possibility of losing agency by denying it is a damning indictment of deterministic psychologies; but the reverse possibility, which also constitutes this description, has powerful therapeutic implications. We may be constrained in many of our lesser choices, but in this one central choice—between being an actor and being an object to be acted upon, between living in an agentic or a deterministic world—it is our choice alone that can determine the outcome.

In this understanding that our choices determine outcomes or consequences we find another way in which the Book of Mormon acknowledges determinism: In the inescapability of Justice, or moral accountability, and our inability to redeem ourselves from the demands of justice. But to understand how such demands make sense in light of agency, we also need to understand how predetermined antecedents enable, rather than constrain, choice.

The Book of Mormon is clear that humankind could not act, we would indeed live in a deterministic world, if it weren’t for the existence of opposition. As Gantt et al. (2014) mentioned, Lehi explains that, “man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other” (2 Nephi 2:16). These two possibilities for action, choosing life or death are represented by the antecedent existence of the tree of life and the forbidden fruit (vs. 15)—the former giving life and the latter leading to death. Since Adam and Eve were already alive, the tree of Life offered no additional opportunities for growth or agency until after death came into the world, at which time the tree of life became central to the possibility for growth and agency. So it was the forbidden fruit that initially offered the possibility of choice, and the tree of life (Christ) that finished the job of bringing meaningful agency into the world.

With the introduction of the tree of knowledge (representing possibility for agency), God warned that Adam and Eve would “surely die” (choose death) if they partook of the fruit; “nevertheless”, he said, “thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given thee” (Moses 3:17). In the commandment not to eat this fruit, perhaps as much as in the fruit itself, God gave Adam and Eve the possibility for free will in this world. In the
act of giving this commandment, the possibility for disobedience presented itself for the first time, free will emerged, and knowledge of good and evil had already entered the world in some sense. Interestingly, the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who strongly influenced developmental and moral psychology through Piaget and Kohlberg, also recognized the connections between the ability to reason (knowledge), the ability to choose, accountability for action, and meaningful human existence (Kant, 1797/2002).

Still, these choices were predetermined: Adam and Eve could either choose to live with ignorance or choose to die with knowledge. And so as William James came to understand, choice itself was unavoidable. That a choice would be made was pre-determined. Somewhat ironically, and like the rest of us, Adam and Eve did not even have the choice to refrain from making a choice. Presented with the ability to choose, and the awareness that choice was possible (through the commandment not to partake), even the choice to refrain from choosing must be a choice. The emergence of knowledge of good and evil, enabled through agency (choice), seems almost to have been inevitable once the commandment was given. But rather than constraining agency in any meaningful sense, these pre-determined antecedents enabled a choice—and an important one.

Indeed in a somewhat odd, but pragmatic sense, the existence and awareness of predetermined options force free will. There would be no meaningful choice if Adam and Eve were simply given everything without the possibility of disobedience or resistance. They would have been like the plants and animals in Eden’s garden, growing perhaps under God’s care, but not by meaningful choice. So the Book of Mormon explains that it was by this initial choice that agency entered the world. This aspect of human agency seems lost on many theists who deny the necessity of Eve and Adam’s choice.

However the job was not complete, and here is where even Kantian psychologists, and many others who affirm a kind of freewill, have fallen short. The deterministic Law of Justice (known elsewhere as the law of cause and effect, Karma, or the Law of the Harvest) prevented Adam and Eve, and all of us, from altering the consequences of their choices. The consequences were as predetermined as the antecedents: ignorant life or knowledgeable death. This dynamic plays out throughout the world today, individually and collectively, in the tension between a static safety and a dangerous freedom. It seems that the more freedom that is granted, the greater the risk of harm, evil and death. This creates a temptation to unduly restrict freedom, not only in act, but often even in thought: parents toward their children, teachers toward their students, governments toward the governed, and sometimes even therapists toward their clients. But overly restricting freedom involves enormous psychological and emotional risks as well, and often rebellion and conflict—a reassertion of freedom—and thus an increased danger of violence, disease, mental illness and death are right around the corner.

It seems the best we can hope for on our own is a kind a tenuous and temporary truce between danger and captivity—a delayed choice. And like our first mortal parents, in the end most of us end up trading one of these deaths for the other: ignorant safety for knowledgeable suffering. Since the fall of Adam and Eve many of our cultural narratives have been infused with the theme, from Exodus to the American Revolution, and on to The Truman Show. And although much of naturalistic psychology could be considered compatible with a utilitarian ethic of maximizing pleasure, even the utilitarian John Stuart Mill acknowledged this bleak choice (Mill, 1863/1906).

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides (p. 14)

To Mill, the sting of knowledge—of knowing both sides—is a greater pleasure than the bliss of ignorance. So the tree of life was guarded, and Adam and Eve were driven out to experience knowledge and death (Gen. 3: 22-24).

But what sort of agency is that which, following the acquisition of knowledge and thus a meaningful choice, only ends in death? Yet that is the way we would experience mortality, if we knew nothing of redemption. All of our choices would be rendered impotent and meaningless by our impending death, collectively and individually. In the words of Abinidi: “Thus all mankind were lost; and behold, they would have
been endlessly lost were it not that God redeemed his people from their lost and fallen state” (Mosiah 16:4). So yes, agency exists for humankind, through the commandment and subsequent choice God gave in the garden, but without redemption it would be a meaningless sort of agency—we would be hopelessly lost in meaningless choices with ultimately equivalent predetermined consequences. No wonder non-theistic psychology becomes hopelessly deterministic. Even when choice is acknowledged, it means little in comparison to what appears to be oppressive determinism in both antecedents and consequences.

However, it is in this dance between agency and determinism (which might also be rendered as between “mercy” and “justice”) that the beauty of the gospel is revealed—not in the absence of one or the other. By Adam and Eve’s one meaningful choice, captivity and death came into the world, and ironically, further meaningful choice would have been lost if that were the end of the story. One choice, and then determinism would have had the victory by enacting the fixed and inevitable consequences: either ignorance or death, which are more alike than different. But Christ, symbolized by the tree of life (1 Nephi 11: 25-33), reconciles justice and mercy—as well as determinism and free will—and finishes the job of bringing agency to humankind. The words of Lehi (2 Nephi 2), mentioned by Gantt et al. (2014), may bear a second look in this light. Agency (limited) and determinism part one:

If Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end. And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin. (verses 22-23).

Agency (completed) and determinism part two:

And the Messiah cometh in the fulness 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, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil . . . . (verses 26-27)

So Adam and Eve, after God grants them a choice, overcome an initial determinism of perpetual status—ignorant safety. Humankind is initially denied the ability to partake of the tree of life, so that they can experience the predetermined consequences of their choices (death) and learn the need for a Savior. They have knowledge now, but remain in captivity to a type of determinism: limited choice and fixed, essentially equivalent, consequences. But ultimately they are allowed to partake of the tree of life (in Christ’s atonement), another choice. We may experience the full weight of predetermined consequences if we so choose, or we may choose to believe, and gain a witness by experience, that the law of Justice has been satisfied in Christ.

And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption. (Alma 34:16).

So through Christ a second choice between life and death, liberty and captivity, is enabled, but with very different implications. Rather than being left only with a choice between ignorant life and knowledgeable death (a bleak but necessary choice), with Christ we are give a meaningful choice between knowledgeable life, and a death that may eventually bring with it a loss of even that knowledge we had once gained (Alma 12:10-11). Rather than between death and ignorance, our choice is now between life and ignorance. Now that is a real choice!

As with the idea of God’s existence and the immi-

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conversations with non-believers we can “speak by way of invitation” (Alma 5:62). For example, inviting them to first consider the possibility that we can choose to experience life in ways that acknowledge and celebrate real choices: first between knowledge and ignorance, between agency and determinism; and then between unity (at-one-ment) and isolation, between life and death.

We can also acknowledge the possibility that one might choose to deny agency, in which case one has also made a choice (albeit one made at best under the illusion that there was no choice made, and at worst under false pretenses). Unless we change our minds about the existence of agency, which would be a reaffirmation of choice, we would thereafter live an existence of self-imposed determinism—indecisive (lacking decision). And thus “carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14), or “driven with the wind and tossed” (James 1:6). Alternatively, as the apostle James explains, it is the person who has decided (chosen), unwaveringly, to seek understanding from God (acknowledging His existence and influence) that receives true wisdom (James 1:5-6). Of course, for this choice to be meaningful, those we engage in such conversations have to first be aware that such a choice exists. Once that awareness is established, we can invite them to decide (see also Joshua 24:15). At that point, some kind of choice becomes inevitable. They will be determined to make a choice, even if it is only the choice to deny the possibility of choice. They will be brought into the thick of living or dying.

When speaking to the believer, Jacob’s words to his “beloved brethren”, quoted by Gantt et al. (2014), provide a possible model that we can follow with believing clients, students and colleagues. Jacob (2 Nephi 10) emphasizes the joyful act of remembering the gifts of agency and redemption offered through God’s divine power, and manifest in Christ’s atonement:

Therefore, cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves—to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh; and remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved. (verses 23-24)

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon does indeed provide a unique grounding for a psychology that acknowledges divine influence, agency and accountability. It also provides unique insights into how these important truths might be communicated to both believers and non-believers. I hope that others will take up the challenge presented by Gantt et al. (2014), and further explore and extend “a psychology grounded in the teachings of the Book of Mormon” (p. 4).

References


