The Book of Mormon, Psychology, and Critical Dialogue: That All Might be Edified and Rejoice Together

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As a scholar it is always an honor to have one's ideas carefully considered by one's colleagues, especially – as in this instance – when such consideration is undertaken by those whose scholarly efforts have long been so influential on one's own thinking and whose penetrating insights have consistently proven their intellectual worth. We are, thus, truly grateful for the time and energy and serious consideration the various respondents to our article (“The Keystone of our Science: Exploring the Premises and Promises of the Book of Mormon for Psychology and Psychotherapy”) have invested in engaging the arguments and ideas we presented there. We have been genuinely challenged, edified, and enlightened by the thoughtful commentaries and critiques offered by Michael Richardson, Matthew Draper, John Gee, and Robert Gleave in their various responses to our exploration of the possible impact that taking the Book of Mormon more seriously might have for LDS psychologists wishing to ground their research, practice, and theorizing more explicitly in its teachings. We can only hope the sort of intellectual dialogue initiated here may in the end prove not only to be an opportune invitation to greater discussion of these and related issues among LDS scholars, but also an effective framework for how to conduct such discussions in a manner that is both sophisticated and charitable.

While extensive replies to each one of the authors who so graciously responded to our work is unfortunately not possible given space constraints, we would nonetheless like to briefly note some reactions to their offered commentaries. We were especially pleased so many of the respondents opted to take our analysis as an invitation to further critical reflection on questions and issues in their own areas of psychological theory and practice. In particular, we very much enjoyed the way in which our respondents chose to explore the expansive possibilities that Book of Mormon teachings have for those seeking to ground their psychological thinking and practice in something other than the philosophy of naturalism so pervasive in our discipline. Thus, we very much welcome Richardson's meditation on the question of human agency and how it might be more deeply articulated and appreciated in both psychological theory and psychotherapeutic practice. Similarly, we found Draper's suggestions for some very specific ways in which the LDS professional might be able to live-out the Christian worldview of the Book of Mormon in non-Christian/secular settings, and do so in ways that their non-Christian peers can both understand and respect, to be quite helpful and thought-provoking. His discussion of compassion as a central guiding principle for genuinely Christian therapeutic practice is important and worthy of careful consideration by all LDS therapists.
Although his overall response was more critical of our analysis and proposal than the other respondents, we nonetheless found ourselves very much in agreement with Gleave’s caution against the all-too-common temptation among LDS practitioners to infuse contemporary psychological science with doctrines of the restored gospel of Christ in the vain hope of effecting some sort of harmonious reconciliation between the two. Taking the gospel of Christ seriously, in both the scholarly arena of our academic disciplines and in our professional lives, is one that demands a high level of sophistication, a very cautious tread, and an unflagging willingness to seek for the spirit of discernment every bit as much as the gift of knowledge.

In addition to the contributions and comments offered by our fellow psychologists, we were particularly heartened to see some of the ways Gee, as a non-social scientist, was able to take up issues we identified and broaden the conversation by offering a fresh perspective from outside the discipline of psychology. Gee’s penetrating analysis demonstrates again that the Book of Mormon embodies intellectual implications that not only span across many academic disciplines, but which also reach deeply into the very heart of the modern world. In the end, for us, such critically reflective and positively expansive dialogue among LDS scholars and practitioners is precisely what our article was intended to stimulate in the first place.

In the spirit of continuing the dialogue our article initiated, as well as in the hope of providing further clarification of our own position, we would like to briefly draw attention to a couple of the relatively few instances in which we believe our respondents may have misread or misunderstood our argument. Draper, for example, seems not to have fully appreciated (or, perhaps, has not been fully persuaded by) our argument that naturalistic psychology is not, in fact, the study of the natural man. Contrary to his assertion that “the study of psychology assuming naturalism is the study of the natural man” (see also Smith & Draper, 2005), we believe that any reading of the nature of the natural man as a “determined natural object rather than a moral agent” (Draper, this volume) reflects a common misreading of King Benjamin’s famous discourse. We are convinced, and believe we have clearly shown, that the assumption of moral agency is pervasive throughout King Benjamin’s analysis of the natural man. For example, according to King Benjamin, the natural man is an enemy to God—not by his fundamental nature as a determinately selfish object but as a willfully rebelling moral agent yielding to the invitations of the Adversary. Further, the natural man is an enemy to God only insofar, and only for as long as, he refuses to “yield to the enticings of the Holy Spirit” and chooses not to “putteth off the natural man” by being “willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit . . .” (Mosiah 3:19). Clearly, whatever else may be the case, for King Benjamin, the natural man is fundamentally a moral agent and not a natural object whose behavior and psychological life are merely subject to impersonal natural forces and physical conditions. Thus our claim is that naturalistic psychology does not even offer an adequate understanding of “the natural man” because it rejects the fundamental reality of moral agency in all meaningful and purposive human behavior. At best, then, we would say naturalistic psychology is not in fact the study of the natural man (i.e., fallen and sinful man), but rather the study of the natural man from the sinful and falsifying perspective of the natural man. That is, man in rebellion against God seeking justification for sin by denying his own moral agency and accountability, as well as rejecting the reality of genuine and transcendent moral distinctions.

On balance, however, this disagreement as to the meaning of the concept of “natural man” is really a relatively minor quibble when considered in the larger context of Draper’s otherwise excellent and powerful article. Somewhat more serious, in contrast, is our disagreement with Gleave’s reading of our argument. Again, due to limited space, we will forgo offering any lengthy analysis or full-blown response here. However, we do wish to note that we firmly believe that what Gleave has identified as his main concerns and themes of criticism are, in fact, misplaced since they seem to be aimed at arguments we did not make and positions we do not hold. Thus, when Gleave asks, “Why do we assume psychology to be the best vehicle of delivery for the precious truths of the Gospel?” we can only respond that we have no answer to this question because such is not what we assume, nor is it a position for which we would wish to argue. We most emphatically do not believe that psychology is the best vehicle for the delivery of the precious truths of the Gospel. Rather, we believe sacred scripture and prophetic ut-
Our vision is not about finding a way to make psychology and the Gospel compatible. Rather, it is about understanding the many subtle—and some of them not so subtle—ways in which psychology must of necessity be understood only as a study of human behavior grounded in and directed by non-naturalistic assumptions and serving non-naturalistic aims and goals. The philosophy of naturalism and the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ are at root fundamentally incompatible worldviews, entailing profoundly divergent truth claims and understandings of reality.

Of course, we are fully aware that, even if grounded in a thoroughly Latter-day Saint perspective, any psychology or psychotherapy by itself would be wholly inadequate absent the soul-changing revelatory power of the Holy Ghost. At best, then, we envision a psychology in which LDS (and other, like-minded Christian) practitioners and professionals can enjoy a conceptual and practical space wherein human agency and moral accountability, as well as the gifts of the Spirit and the healing powers of the Atonement of Christ, have place to be manifest, be recognized for what they are, and be defended in an intellectually sophisticated and respectable manner. We do not seek to articulate, or even advocate for, any particular LDS Psychology or Psychotherapy, so much as to help our fellow LDS psychologists recognize the many subtle—ways in which a philosophy of naturalism that is toxic to the reality of the Restored Gospel permeates contemporary psychological theory, research, and practice. Our hope is that in doing so they might not only reconsider their intellectual and moral commitments to such a psychology, but they might also re-examine the teaching of sacred scripture as a means of re-envisioning what psychological research and therapeutic practice might otherwise be were it to be constructed on a vastly different intellectual foundation.

Similarly, we doubt we can provide a satisfying answer to Gleave’s second question (“And why do we assume that psychology can be ‘saved’ through the infusion of the Gospel at all?”) because we do not believe that psychology can or ought to be “saved through an infusion of the Gospel”—particularly if one maintains that psychology must of necessity be understood only as a study of human behavior grounded in and directed by naturalistic assumptions and serving naturalistic aims and goals. The philosophy of naturalism and the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ are at root fundamentally incompatible worldviews, entailing profoundly divergent truth claims and understandings of reality.

However, naturalistic psychology, or psychology grounded in naturalistic assumptions, is not (or at least need not be) synonymous in either content or meaning with psychology, because psychological theorizing, research, and practice can be grounded in non-naturalistic assumptions. We have little hope that psychology as a professional discipline will (in the foreseeable future), as a whole, relinquish its deeply-rooted naturalism, but we do not feel the need to identify the profession as a whole by its prevailing naturalistic assumptions. Thus, while naturalistic psychology may be fundamentally antagonistic to Gospel truth, psychology need not be, if we can create space for an ideological pluralism within the discipline. Psychology as a research discipline and therapeutic practice has a lengthy history of creating room for a number of vastly different and competing philosophical paradigms (consider, for example, the philosophical and theoretical differences between Behaviorism and Humanism, or Psychoanalysis and Existentialism), as well as a willingness to treat differing perspectives as legitimate contributions to the ongoing discussion of what human beings are and how therapy could be conducted.

As such, our goal is not to “modify” existing theories by inserting into them Gospel concepts, or to frame naturalistic psychology in ways that we think are more compatible with Gospel precepts. Our vision is not to “save” these many competing traditions, but merely to provide an alternative philosophical grounding to them for both the research and practice of psychology and psychotherapy, one in which moral agency, meaningful divine activity, and genuine moral accountability are taken seriously. Our hope is, rather, that our colleagues can help us undertake such a project (and many have already striven to do just that), and to articulate and defend the theoretical foundations of such a perspective in a way that earns a place at the table of discussion within the discipline. After all, if Carl Rogers can carve out a space for his worldview in the discipline—a worldview that in many ways departed substantially from the deterministic theories of his day, even if not in a way that satisfies (or should satisfy) Latter-day Saints—then so can we.

1. The many intellectual and spiritual dangers of such an endeavor have already been amply articulated by Sorenson in his masterful and still deeply relevant 1981 article, “The Shotgun Marriage of the Psychological Therapy and the Gospel of Repentance.”
In short, then, the purpose of examining psychology from a perspective grounded in the truths of the Restored Gospel and the Book of Mormon is not so much to rescue naturalistic psychology from some set or subset of its excesses, nor is it merely to provide some religiously sensitive minor correctives. Rather, we propose an alternative will challenge and overturn it by providing an intellectually viable and spiritually honest alternative to naturalistic models of psychological theorizing and practice. It is in that spirit that we chose to open our article by stating the wish to examine some of the ways in which the teachings of 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” (Gantt, Wages, & Thayne, this volume). Likewise, it is why we bring our paper to a close by again stating:

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.

In other words, we are not in the business of seeking to “save” psychology by infusing it with Gospel practices, ideas, or ideals. Rather, we simply wish to encourage LDS psychologists to engage in deeper reflection on the nature of the intellectual and spiritual commitments of their chosen discipline, and to do so in light of the profound truths about God, man, and the universe that are contained in the Book of Mormon. We believe it is well past time when LDS psychologists—long accustomed to examining their faith in the light of theories and therapies of naturalistic psychology—began to carefully examine their psychology in light of the assumptions, doctrines, and worldview of the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ, particularly as found in the keystone of our religion.

References


