Unmingling the Philosophies of Men and Scripture: Philosophical and Theological Reflection for Latter-day Saint Psychologists

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The Myth of Neutrality

Historically, at least through much of the 20th century, psychologists routinely assumed that psychological research and psychotherapy were essentially value-free enterprises in which the objective, scientific study of human behavior granted practitioners the power to make value-neutral, unbiased judgements about human behavior, particularly regarding the rationality or psychological utility of their clients' religious beliefs and practices. As Nelson (2009) notes, there was (and still is) a pervasive disciplinary consensus that diagnosis, etiology, and treatment "decisions should be made by expert managers, who are morally neutral authorities on their subject and able to effectively solve problems" (p. 199). Presumably, this privileged epistemological stance was made possible by virtue of psychologists' unwavering reliance on secular, rational, and empirically data-driven scientific findings and theories to ground research and guide therapeutic practice.

However, at least since the publication of Allen Bergin's ground-breaking article, "Psychotherapy and Religious Values" in 1980, the role that values (religious and otherwise) inescapably play in psychology has been of wide-spread concern in the discipline. Today, it is generally accepted that psychology is an intrinsically value-laden enterprise. However, despite an ongoing scholarly dialogue regarding the influence that both the client's personal values and the therapist's personal values have in therapy, for example, practitioners have (for the most part) been less eager to acknowledge or confront the role that professional or disciplinary values play in shaping practice. Regardless, as Alexander and Shelton (2014) state, "little about the perspectives and practices of professional psychology as a whole could be considered value-free" (p. 14). Unfortunately, as Reber (2020) argues, "professional values receive less attention in the

literature and in training and education than personal values. Nevertheless, professional values constitute an important area in which the risk of values imposition exists" (p. 50).

A principle reason for this disciplinary disinterest is the widespread belief that psychology, in both its research and applied manifestations, is fundamentally a scientific project; that is, it is an essentially objective, value-neutral enterprise of knowledge production and the subsequent deployment of that knowledge to manage or repair human problems. It comes as no surprise, then, that many psychologists—whether LDS or not—adopt a view in which science is held to be uniquely capable of providing psychologists with certain highly specialized understandings and techniques for human problem-solving, understandings and techniques that are in some important way independent of such things as values, moral judgment, social prejudice, or religious bias.

Unfortunately, this perspective reflects less the reality of scientific inquiry than it does what has been termed "the myth of neutrality," a very popular modern myth that stubbornly persists in the face of many decades of critical scholarly work thoroughly undermining its credibility. Given the pervasiveness of this myth, however, it is easy for psychologists to assume their "methods are transparent and unbiased windows to the real objective world" (Slife et al., 2012, p. 215). Granted, while many psychologists do recognize that "their methods involve unproven assumptions or prejudgments about the world to be investigated. Yet they routinely report their findings as if the myth of neutrality is still in effect" (Slife et al., 2012, p. 215). Nonetheless, both researchers and practitioners are "virtually unanimous in presenting the traditional scientific method as the ultimate means of avoiding bias and discovering the uninterpreted reality of the natural world" (Slife et al., 2012, p. 215).

However, as Hall (2003) trenchantly notes, "No knowledge is neutral, but rather is always based on some . . . perception of reality and on some . . . perspective of what is important to know" (p. 176), as well as *how* it is to be known. Likewise, no psychological research endeavor or therapeutic intervention is neutral, unbiased, or free from the influence of underlying metaphysical, epistemological, moral, and even theological assumptions. Indeed, the very presumption that scientific investigation in psychology *should be* objective, value-neutral, and unbiased in order to secure a truthful and reliable understanding of the reality of human behavior is itself a value and not an empirical fact of the world. It reflects, rather, a particular moral and epistemological commitment to seeing the world in specific ways and in light of pre-selected aims and interpretations. The methods, findings, and aspirations of scientific psychology are inextricably shot through with value commitments, philosophical presumptions, and biases of various sorts, be they moral, political, theological, cultural, economic, or otherwise.

One problematic consequence of the discipline's lack of self-reflective critical attention to such matters is that for many therapists the philosophical and theological assumptions of the interpretive frameworks that inform their training and daily practice remain almost entirely hidden from view, unacknowledged and taken-for-granted. Unfortunately, the "hiddenness" of these assumptions means that therapists often engage with their clients in ways that can have a tremendous impact on how both therapist and client comprehend one another but in naïve, unreflective, and often morally, philosophically, and theologically confused ways. For psychologists to be unaware of the profound, though often quite subtle, influence that the professional values of their larger discipline inescapably play in therapy and research is to run the risk of being what Meehl (1959) long ago termed "crypto-missionaries." In other words, it is to run the risk of implicitly proselytizing others into a particular philosophical worldview, along

with its attendant values, perspectives, and self-understandings, while maintaining a professional stance suggesting that nothing of the kind is happening. It is to engage in a surreptitious process of values conversion all while claiming to only be "following the science" by providing the best evidence-based, unbiased, and value-free interventions for the treatment of objective psychological ills.

The Philosophical Value of Naturalism

Perhaps the troubling worldview to which LDS psychologists may unwittingly be proselyting their clients, students, and others—because of their belief in the myth of neutrality—is the philosophy of naturalism. In essence, the philosophy of naturalism is the claim that natural laws, principles, or forces, operating entirely on material entities, ultimately govern and explain all events that occur in the world. Thus, whether it is the behavior of giant planets and distant stars, tiny atoms, quarks, and muons, or fresh-faced young college students falling in and out of love, the truth of the matter is that matter is all that really matters. In this understanding, the physical (i.e., material) world is taken to be self-sufficient; that is, all events are considered inexplicably linked to material entities whose actions are mechanically fixed and necessarily determined. All events in the world, including human behavior, are necessarily and mechanically determined because they are governed by independent, undirected laws, forces, and principles, which are themselves rationally discernable via objective scientific inquiry.

The philosophy of naturalism has become, as historian of psychology Thomas Leahey has noted, "science's central dogma" (Leahey, 1992, p. 379; see also, Hunter, 2007). Likewise, according to Clark (2016b), "At the turn of the 21st century, naturalism is the reigning orthodox assumption of most faculty in most universities across the English-speaking world" (p.1). This orthodox assumption is seldom explicitly acknowledged or subjected to any sustained critical

examination or defense in the intellectual discourse of the social sciences generally, and psychology in particular.

In psychology, the assumption of naturalism is typically manifest in the encouragement to "take beliefs, desires, preferences, choices, and so on that appear to make-up our conscious, intelligent, psychological life and explain them in terms that are non-conscious, nonmental, and non-psychological" (Goetz & Taliaferro, 2008, p. 16). It is for this reason that we routinely see theoretical attempts to explain all human behavior, cognition, and emotion as being *entirely* reducible to the product of genetic dictate, neurochemical activity, mechanical cognitive process, environment stimulation, or some complex combination of these various causes (as in what is often termed the "Biopsychosocial Model").

Many psychologists, often unaware of the pervasive influence of naturalism in contemporary psychological theorizing and research, commonly describe human thought, feeling, and behavior as the passive product of the mechanical operation of natural laws. The pervasiveness of the assumption of naturalism has led many psychologists to echo the view Heiman (2001) articulates when he writes:

> 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. (Heiman, 2001, p. 7)

This naturalistic view of behavior goes far toward explaining why so many psychological researchers and clinicians show little interest in, and devote little serious research attention to, the potentially vital and illuminating role that moral agency plays in human behavior.

Most psychologists would readily agree that their discipline is best described as the scientific study of behavior whose express purpose is the discovery of the laws of nature underlying human behavior, the comprehension of which affords us an account of all human action and meaning that is completely and merely human, purely immanent; that is, an account in which there are no hints of divine involvement in human affairs, no transcendent meaning or purpose in our lives. In short, naturalism leads to studying human beings as reactive natural organisms much in the way that other organisms and natural events are studied in the natural sciences.

Some Manifestations of Naturalism in Psychology

We can see the naturalistic perspective manifest clearly in introductory psychology textbooks, typically the student's first encounter with the disciplinary worldview of psychology. Such textbooks are an excellent touchstone for assessing the prevalence of key ideas in the discipline as they are (by design) dedicated to recounting the consensus view of the mainstream of the discipline in a simple, accessible, and direct manner. Almost all introductory texts commence their descriptions of human beings with a chapter on the "biological basis of behavior," a chapter that typically makes a case for understanding human behavior in terms of its fundamentally biochemical, genetic, and evolutionary origins. Following detailed discussion of the biological bases of behavior, most introductory textbooks then proceed immediately to an examination of the mechanical and biological processes of sensation and their presumed causal contributions to perception and cognition, offering thereby an account of the naturalistic origins

of the human experience of meaning. From such preliminary expositions, then, detailed and extensive accounts of psychological development, learning, memory, personality, social life, psychopathology and other such human phenomena are presented, but always in such a way that any serious intimation that human beings might possess divine origins or an eternal soul, act in genuinely purposive ways as moral agents, or engage in social relationships that are inherently meaningful is entirely absent.

Because the philosophical value of naturalism forms the basis of scientific inquiry and practice in contemporary psychology, the possibility that human experience might legitimately transcend mortal dimensions, or involve genuine agentic interactions with a loving, active and involved personal God is ruled out long before any serious investigation is undertaken. The possibility that human behavior might not be adequately explicable in terms of measurable variables or reducible to determinate quantities of physical stuff is rejected at the outset by the *a priori* philosophical requirements of the naturalistic perspective, not because of any overwhelming empirical or objective evidence that demands such a conclusion. Data, after all, does not in fact speak for itself, but must always be interpreted. Rather, the possibility of genuine agentic interactions with a personal, active, loving God is ruled out because of a hidden pre-investigatory bias towards not only naturalistic explanation, but also even more basically a naturalistic conceptualization of the world of meaningful, real things. Well before any data is collected, measured, sorted, operationalized, or had any causal inferences drawn about it, naturalistic interpretation is already well underway and manifest in the very empirical methods being employed and the goals already selected that such methods are meant to help the psychological research achieve. After all, one does not begin looking for causal connections between measurable (i.e., physical) Independent Variables and Dependent Variables unless one

has already committed to the notion that the world is in fact composed of quantities of things in causal relationships, a world where determinism is regnant. In short, our research methods and therapeutic practices, embraced because they are thought to be objective, unbiased, and value-neutral, are in fact shot through with philosophical values and pre-investigatory assumptions that inescapably and profoundly color the sorts of questions we ask and the sorts of answers we find, as well as the overall story to be told regarding what it means to be a human being.

A central consequence of all of this is that because of the hidden philosophical values of naturalism, our predominant psychological accounts of human behavior, experience, and relationships conceptualize these things as bereft of not only any real or deep spiritual or moral dimension, but also rejects any view of human life in which it possesses intrinsic purpose (beyond, perhaps, mere survival and gene propagation) or worth (beyond self-preservation and self-aggrandizement). Given its naturalistic presuppositions and values, contemporary psychology offers a vision of human beings in which we are, as noted above, “merely human” (or, to invoke Marvin Minsky’s provocative phrase, “meat machines”). More specifically, we are merely reactive, biochemical organisms situated in complex environmental circumstances, acted upon by powerful natural forces and laws of which we are seldom (if ever) aware, over which we possess little control, and in whose operations we do not meaningfully participate. As the famous social psychologist Stanley Milgram (1992) declared, “The implicit model for all 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).

What naturalistic assumptions entail here is that there is no intrinsic or transcendent worth in human existence, reactive organisms that we are, nor can there be any genuine moral

purpose or meaning in our actions given that all such actions are merely necessitated and reflexive in nature. Such a view of human beings is one in which human beings are entirely imminent creatures; that is, creatures whose existence is sufficiently accounted for in naturalistic terms and according to naturalistic principles. Even experience of the transcendent or the divine, the experience of real relationship with a truly present God, much less belief that such experiences might be possible, is in such a perspective itself only the necessitated product of imminent forces and conditions (e.g., genetic predispositions, neurochemical activity, psychological need, or cultural upbringing).

Theism as Alternative to Naturalism

In light of core Latter-day Saint doctrines regarding God, moral agency, and human purpose, it would seem necessary for us to explore possible alternative assumptions upon which to found psychological research, theorizing, and therapeutic efforts that do not fall prey to the limitations of naturalism and which do not require the deformation of Gospel teachings by forcing them to conform to naturalistic values and presumptions. One alternative to the philosophical value of naturalism that is worth briefly considering here is theism, or, perhaps more accurately, what Slife et al. (2010) have termed “strong theism.” This view maintains that an active, involved God is a central and inescapable feature of the world, especially the human world of meaningful experience and relationships, and, as such, must be taken into account by our attempts to make psychological sense of ourselves and others. This stands in stark contrast to the “a-theistic” value bias of the naturalistic perspective in which God is either non-existent or unimportant. Accordingly, theism of this sort maintains that God is not some sort of theological “add on” whose relevance to our understanding of the world comes along after the hard work of science has been completed, perhaps to help those of us who need it to cope with what is a

fundamentally meaningless, disenchanted, and mechanical world. A strongly theistic perspective is one in which God's existence and involvement in the world of human affairs is not taken to be simply a matter of subjective insistence or psychological need, but is rather an inescapable fact of the ways things really are.

In the strong theistic perspective, God is intensely and intimately involved in the ongoing events of the world, especially the human world. In this view, according to the philosopher and theologian Alvin Plantinga (2001), "God is already and always intimately acting in nature which depends from moment to moment . . . upon divine activity" (p. 350). Indeed, as Gantt et al. (2015) argue concerning the conceptual implications of the Book of Mormon for our approach to psychology, "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" (2015, p. 5). The prophet Joseph Smith (1980) taught, "It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with Him as one man converses with another" (p. 305). Unlike the absent God of naturalism, the need-generated God of many psychological theories, or the passive God of deism, the strong version of theism offers a philosophical and theological starting point for re-conceptualizing psychology and psychotherapy in light of a God who has descended from on high to be among us, to suffer with us as we suffer, to rejoice with us as we rejoice, to experience our pains and temptations, trials and griefs, so that He "may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:12). This is 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" (Gantt et al., 2015, p. 6). As

the Savior Himself taught: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls” (Matt. 11:28-29). The reality of such a God is, to employ an over-used cliché, a “game-changer,” a fundamental truth that profoundly alters our understanding of human nature and human purpose, science and religion, reason and faith, therapy and suffering, and, indeed, the very nature of the cosmos itself. As Slife et al. (2010) note, “if . . . the assumption of a currently active God is central and pervasive, not superficial or an ‘add-on,’ then the inclusion of this assumption changes the nature of the other [naturalistic] assumptions, sometime radically” (p. 165).

In contrast to naturalism, a strongly theistic view contends that God is absolutely vital to any adequate investigation into or subsequent understanding of human psychology and for any conception of psychotherapy or healing. This is not, however, because God’s involvement in human affairs is the only matter that matters, but rather that our understanding of what does matter is hopelessly incomplete if His participation and involvement is minimized, ignored, or dismissed. In contrast to the philosophical value of naturalism, which claims that the entirety of human affairs and psychological life are explicable in terms of impersonal natural laws, measurable variables, and mechanical forces, the philosophical value of strong theism argues that genuine understanding of the world, especially the world of human relationships and meanings, can only be brought about if the central reality of a loving, engaged, and purposive God is fully acknowledged and engaged as a fundamental starting point for fruitful psychological inquiry and therapeutic intervention.

The Philosophical Value of Psychological Egoism

Because naturalism suggests that human behavior is to be understood solely in terms of the impersonal, deterministic operations of mechanical laws on material objects, the question of motivation has long been of paramount interest in psychology. That is, the discipline has been deeply concerned to offer an account of behavior that explains the nature of the causal forces or conditions responsible for initiating (otherwise seemingly intentional) behavior in the first place. It is in the context of psychology's interest in motivation that the philosophical value of psychological egoism is perhaps most clearly manifest. Psychological egoism is the notion that concern for oneself is the principle source of motivation underlying and the ultimate goal of all one's own actions. Psychological egoism is a theory of motivation that asserts that human nature is constituted such that all behavior is at its root motivated, whether consciously or unconsciously, by the desire to maximize individual pleasure and minimize pain. Accordingly, as Feinberg (2007) notes, "all human actions when properly understood can be seen to be motivated by selfish desires," or, more precisely, "the only thing anyone is capable of desiring or pursuing ultimately (as an end in itself) is his *own* self-interest" (p. 167, emphasis in the original).

Psychological egoism is typically presented as a description of psychological fact about the nature of human nature and the ultimate source of motivation. "It asserts," Feinberg (2007) states, "not merely that all men do as a contingent matter of fact 'put their own interests first,' but also that they are capable of nothing else, human nature being what it is" (p. 167). Feinberg (2007) further states, "no psychological egoist denies that people sometimes do desire things other than their own welfare [whether conscious or not]—the happiness of other people, for example; but all psychological egoists insist that people are capable of desiring the happiness of others only when they take it to be a *means* to their own happiness" (p. 167). So, in short, if psychological egoism is true, then "purely altruistic or benevolent actions and desires do not

exist; but people sometimes appear to be acting unselfishly and disinterestedly when they take the interests of others to be means to the promotion of their own self-interest" (Feinberg, 2007, p. 167).

Some Manifestations of Psychological Egoism in Psychology

Many contemporary theorists in psychology have been strong advocates for the assumption of psychological egoism, including such diverse figures as Sigmund Freud, B. F. Skinner, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Albert Ellis, Robert Perloff, Ed Diener, and David Buss, each offering their own unique account of human behavior that draws upon the assumption of psychological egoism. A principle reason that so many divergent theories of motivation and behavior are united by a common conceptual commitment to psychological egoism is that this commitment is almost never acknowledged as a philosophical assumption or professional value. Rather, it is usually accepted as a simple empirical fact of human nature and thus a necessary component of any adequate explanation of human behavior because it establishes the originary source of motivation. As Reeve (2025) states, "The study of motivation and emotion reveals what people want and why they want it. It reveals what people need, and it reveals what makes people happy. It literally reveals the contents of human nature" (p. 13).

Interestingly, what this sort of claim actually reveals is that prior to any study of motivation that might reveal the "contents of human nature" it is already assumed that psychological egoism is the content of human nature. Indeed, what has been asserted here—and throughout much of the literature of contemporary psychology—is not itself a rationally or empirically demonstrated fact of the world, but rather only an assumption about human nature, a philosophical value, and a hidden one at that. As a philosophical assumption, psychological egoism has a fairly specific point of origin and course of development in the history of ideas—as

well as an equally lengthy history of cogent rebuttals and viable alternatives. Nonetheless, a great deal of what passes as empirical, fact-based analysis of human motivation and behavior, as well as much that informs common clinical practice and professional ethics, is grounded in the unexamined philosophical assumption of psychological egoism.

Although there are many examples upon which we might draw to illustrate some of the ways in which psychological egoism is assumed in contemporary psychology, we will briefly explore only one: the concept of need. The language of biological, psychological, emotional, sexual, and social need is ubiquitous in contemporary psychological theory and therapeutic practice. Indeed, despite ongoing criticism, one of the most influential and widely disseminated theories of motivation in psychology, education, business, and healthcare is Abraham Maslow's (1943) well-known "hierarchy of needs," a theoretical account whose five-tier pyramidal structure and easy visual accessibility have helped to make it a cornerstone of common understanding of human motivation and behavior. In the clinical realm, much of psychopathology, emotional distress, sexual confusion, depression, anxiety, and other such therapeutic issues are often explained primarily, if not solely, in terms of unmet or conflicting needs of one sort or another.

Of course, various therapies differ regarding exactly how best to go about identifying particular needs and negotiating conflicts between them, what precise needs are thought to be most important, and what successful outcomes for the therapy actually looks like. However, despite such differences, a common commitment to the notion that not only are human beings composed of various sorts of needs that drive their behavior—the frustration of which generates suffering—but also that the central aim of psychotherapy is to assist individuals in more effectively identifying their most basic needs, determining how best to gratify those needs, and

learning to see themselves and others as need-driven (i.e., psychologically egoistic) beings. For example, as Wubbolding and Robey (2012) argue, “Human needs constitute the engines of human behavior,” and therefore, competent therapists should explore which of their clients’ needs are being effectively satisfied or left unsatisfied, so that they can “then assist clients to make more effective choices for fulfilling their own needs and the needs of other people significant to them” (p. 7). Hamon and Bull (2016) state, “individuals will make choices that provide the best possible outcomes for themselves in light of options available to them” and when “relationships are no longer profitable—when costs outweigh rewards—or when a party sees another relationship as more profitable, the relationship is likely to be terminated for a better one” (p. 27). In short, the approach “emphasizes the importance of understanding costs, rewards, and profits in initiating, maintaining, and ending human relationships. (p. 27). Thus, therapists operating within the confines of a professional framework that takes psychological egoism for granted often end-up encouraging their clients—especially couples and families—to adopt not only a “what do you have to offer me?” tactic in negotiating and managing their relationships, but even more expansively fostering a general understanding of themselves and others as fundamentally self-interested pleasure maximizers.

The assumption of psychological egoism, Bishop (2007) notes, “tends to view the world and others largely as aids for or impediments to our projects and self-actualization” (p. 164). Thus, when it comes to social relationships, the inherent dignity and worth of others, as well as any responsibilities or obligations the individual might have to them, become marginalized. There is no foundational standard of inherent worth or moral obligation to others since the only criterion available for evaluating the worth of others is their ability to contribute to one's pursuit of authenticity and the satisfaction of one’s own needs and desires. Applied to marriage, for

example, this perspective leads to "viewing relationships . . . as functioning as the primary arenas for emotional satisfaction, belonging and purpose . . . [it tends] to transmute marriage into an instrument or means for the fulfillment of goals, needs and desires of the individual" (p. 180). In short, if psychological egoism is taken to be true of human nature, then individuals can only engage with others in terms of their utility for fulfilling the individual's desire to live authentically (i.e., according to their own subjective, emotional reality). Others are essentially reduced to the status of instruments that either serve the individual's desired ends or frustrating objects that hinder the achievement of those ends.

Once one sees the instrumental implications of psychological egoism it becomes clear that many of the ways we conceptualize the nature and meaning of sexual intimacy and relationships in contemporary psychology reflects a fundamentally instrumental worldview. It is common, for example, to suggest that individuals possess—and are possessed by—certain sexual needs and that these needs are continually pressing the individual for gratification in one way or another such the individual must find some outlet, or effectively manage their sexual relationships with similarly driven persons, in order to reduce unpleasant psychological pressure, avoid unnecessary emotional pain, and live a more authentic life rooted in the expression of sexual desire and identity. Indeed, it is often thought that the dimension of sexual needs and desires is among the most important of all the dimensions of need, and, as such, it constitutes the defining psychological feature of individual identity. Unfortunately, if true, this implies that our most sacred and intimate forms of relationship are in fact merely elaborate rituals obscuring the reality that we really just use one another as instrumental means for attaining individual sexual ends, and we do so because we must and cannot do otherwise. In the end, we are reduced to being slaves to our sexual needs and orientations, relegated always to a deceptive and

manipulative social and interpersonal dance whose purpose never rises above the level of attaining physical and emotional gratification. The only role available for agency to play in such a view is akin to that afforded to a perpetually hungry diner standing before an elaborate buffet table. He can choose to eat whatever he happens to desire, and he can eat as much as he desires. However, the one thing that is not available to him, and never can be, is to give up his place at the table, to share or give away his food to another, and to do so out of genuine love and concern, no strings (conscious or unconscious) attached. When the self is defined by its needs, there is no escape from need, or from instrumentalism and the reduction of others to the status of objects for the use of the self.

Moral Agency, Relationality, and Atonement as Alternative to Psychological Egoism

As noted earlier, psychologists often consider psychological egoism to be a fact of human nature, particularly given the idea's pervasive manifestation in our modern culture of consumerism, hyper-individualism, and generally instrumentalist approach to interpersonal, social, educational, and political and professional relationships. However, insofar as the value of psychological egoism remains a hidden bias informing our research, theory, and practice, it blinds us to other possibilities and prevents us from taking up our work in psychology in ways that might be more harmonious with the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel in which moral agency, compassion, charity, and selfless service are not only central teachings but also reflect a core ontological understanding of human nature and human possibility.

Taking moral agency as an alternative starting point for a psychological account of human beings and their relationships, it becomes possible to see a way clear of the problematic implications of psychological egoism, as well as the naturalistic and deterministic assumptions on which it feeds. Rather than getting bogged down in interminable arguments about whether human motives are fundamentally egoistic or fundamentally altruistic—as many critical

discussions of psychological egoism do—the assumption of moral agency allows us to see both selfish and unselfish actions and motives as distinct possibilities that are meaningfully present in all of our interpersonal and social relationships. In other words, because we are moral agents, our dynamic, meaningful, relational, and contextually enmeshed intentions matter in such a way that it is possible for us to live in both selfish and unselfish ways, in particular moments, for particular reasons, and with particular people. In short, if we take moral agency seriously, we also assume that human actions matter, and that they matter deeply and profoundly.

Furthermore, this view of personhood rejects the notion that to be human is first and foremost to be an isolated, individual self that looks out on a world of objects that possess only instrumental value as potential sources of gratification or frustration for the individual. Rather, the perspective we are (admittedly briefly) articulating here is one in which to be human is to always already be at the most fundamental ontological level a social being, relational and familial all the way down. Indeed, in this view, moral agency only makes sense within a genuinely relational context of shared meanings and possibilities, of shared obligations and responsibilities, of shared understandings and histories, both immanent and transcendent. As divine yet mortal beings, we are always situated in moral contexts within which we can take up the relational possibilities of those contexts in ways that are self-serving, manipulative, deceptive, or objectifying. Likewise, and truer to our divine nature, we can also give ourselves over to the moral demands of our relationships in such a way as to “be for the other,” engaging them in honest, compassionate, charitable and self-forgetting ways. Because this view understands human nature, at its most basic level, in terms of intentionality, moral agency, genuine relationality, and divine transcendence it allows us to escape the narrowed-down and confining conceptual straight-jacket of psychological egoism. In so doing, it permits us to see

human actions and relationships in ways that do not reduce them to mere objects in some manipulative, self-serving hedonic calculus that casts all of our interactions in terms of an underlying and inescapable means-ends rationality. Further, because this alternative account of the well-springs of human action and relationship rejects the founding tenets of psychological egoism, it renders relational wholeness, interpersonal intimacy, and atonement as genuine human possibilities.

Once we see human beings as moral agents enmeshed in morally significant relationships that provide the necessary context within which their identities are constituted and in which they constitute them, we can see that genuine unity of soul and shared understanding is possible, as is reconciliation, redemption, and compassion (lit., "suffering-with"). In this view, then, Christ is not so much asking for us to simply be nice to one another—presumably because doing so will pay individual dividends later in heaven—nor is he commanding us to obey an impossible command to be self-less when we are by nature congenitally selfish. Rather, if we take the relational view of moral agency here seriously, Christ is simply calling us to accept the truth about who we really are, to embrace the reality that we really are moral agents, and we really are capable of yielding to the possibilities of being-for others and at-one with them (and Christ) even as He is. A psychology animated at its heart by such an understanding of human nature, interpersonal relationship, and moral possibility is a psychology capable of not only addressing human problems, but one that is endowed with the intellectual and spiritual resources to truly heal, edify, and give hope to those it is intended not just to study but to serve.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present analysis underscores the profound philosophical and theological tensions embedded within contemporary psychological theory and practice,

particularly for Latter-day Saint psychologists. The pervasive assumptions of scientific neutrality, naturalism, and psychological egoism are not merely methodological tools but deeply rooted value-laden commitments that shape both the interpretation of human behavior and the aims of psychological research and therapeutic intervention. As we have attempted to show, these assumptions too often go unexamined, despite carrying significant implications for how we conceptualize agency, meaning, and the nature and purpose of human life. The failure to critically engage these underlying frameworks risks inadvertently prioritizing secular ideologies over revealed truths, thereby perpetuating the very mingling of scripture with the philosophies of men that Latter-day Saint teachings caution us against. Without careful, sustained, and critical reflection, Latter-day Saint psychologists risk becoming "crypto-missionaries," implicitly promoting a worldview that is incompatible with the theological foundations of the Restoration.