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

Edwin E. Gantt*, Samuel D. Major, Jarom Hickenlooper, and Elizabeth Johnson

Brigham Young University

Abstract

This paper critically examines the philosophical assumptions underlying contemporary psychology and psychotherapy, particularly for Latter-day Saint (LDS) practitioners. Drawing on the doctrinal warning against mingling scripture with the "philosophies of men," the authors identify and analyze several pervasive yet often unexamined assumptions within the discipline, including the myth of neutrality, naturalism, necessary determinism, and psychological egoism. The paper argues that these assumptions are not empirically grounded or value-neutral but instead reflect deeply embedded philosophical commitments that shape both theoretical frameworks and clinical practices in ways that may conflict with core doctrines of the Restored Gospel. Each of these assumptions is subjected to critical scrutiny. This critique reveals the extent to which contemporary psychology may inadvertently promote a worldview incompatible with LDS theological understandings of divine identity, purpose, and moral agency. In response, the authors offer alternative philosophical foundations more consistent with LDS theology, including strong theism and embodied moral agency. These alternatives affirm the active involvement of God in human life and the meaningful, purposive nature of human action. The paper concludes by advocating for an integrated approach in which psychological theory and practice are informed by both philosophical reflection and revealed truth, fostering greater coherence, self-awareness, and ethical responsibility in therapeutic work.

Keywords**:** naturalism, determinism, psychological egoism, moral agency, strong theism

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The phrase "philosophies of men, mingled with scripture" is one with which most members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are familiar, and one to which they often make reference, whether in formal church settings or in casual conversation with one another. The phrase is drawn directly from the liturgy of the temple endowment and almost always has a negative conno-

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tation attached to it. That the phrase would have such negative associations for Latter-day Saints is unsurprising given that in the endowment drama it is Satan who employs the phrase to (accurately) describe both the manner and content of his teaching among the children of men. Thus, as ordinarily understood, it serves as a caution for members against succumbing to, adopting, or promoting secular or worldly philosophies and ideologies, especially when using scripture or the language of "god-talk" to give those ideas a veneer of divine sanction or religious authority. In this way, members of the Church are encouraged to rely on clear prophetic counsel, studying and teaching the "plain and precious" (1 Ne. 13:40) doctrines of scripture.

While it is true that all scriptural and doctrinal understanding necessarily involves engaging sacred texts and prophetic teachings in light of one's personal understanding, informed as it must be by larger cultural and intellectual contexts, the danger here may not be so much engaging in "mingling" itself, but in doing so without awareness or, even more seriously, by unquestioningly privileging human ideas above divine revelations (Bukowski, 2016). As the Apostle Paul cautioned the early saints in the city of Colossae, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Col. 2:8).

Ultimately, as a covenant people, Elder Hartman Rector, Jr. (1974) stated, "we are not called to preach the philosophies of men mingled with scripture or our own ideas or the mysteries of the kingdom, nor are we called to bring forth new doctrine" (p. 105). Similarly, Elder F. Enzio Busche (1980) taught, "the half-truths of men, often mingled with scripture, are sometimes strong enough to fulfill the expectations of the people for a season or for a generation, but they can neither bring them along the path of exaltation and eternal life nor bring satisfying answers to the demanding problems of mankind in these days" (p. 28).

This sacred admonition to avoid teaching the philosophies of men, mingled with scripture is, we would argue, not only of importance to Sunday School teachers, full-time missionaries, or zealous philosophy professors, but is also of particular relevance to LDS psychologists and therapists. We trust that most LDS psychologists take the injunction against improper "mingling" seriously, and so genuinely wish to avoid distorting gospel truth through either doctrinal carelessness or giving pride of place to secular ideologies and philosophical worldviews. However, we also realize that the influence of secular philosophies, values, and ideologies, particularly when often unquestioningly endorsed by one's discipline and professional colleagues, is not always immediately obvious. That is, it is quite possible, even despite one's intentions to the contrary, to have adopt certain "philosophies of men" over the course of one's professional training and practice—philosophies that sharply contrast with central gospel doctrines and teachings—without even fully realizing one has done so. And, further, having unreflectively absorbed and adopted these ideas, values, and assumptions, one might then well confidently defend and disseminate them through the course of one's daily practice as a psychological professional, never fully realizing not only the many ways in which that practice is informed and guided by such ideas, hidden and taken-for-granted as they are, but also not fully appreciating the full extent of their moral, practical, and theological implications.

By way of an attempt to make clearer what some of these "philosophies of men" might be, where they are manifest in contemporary psychological theory and practice, and what some of their implications are, this paper will examine three common, though typically hidden, philosophical assumptions that ground much thinking in contemporary psychology and psychotherapy. In particular, we will examine the philosophical assumptions of scientific neutrality, naturalism, determinism, and psychological egoism. Further, we will argue that these assumptions are antithetical to, and thus ultimately undermine, many core teachings of the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ, teachings that LDS therapists (and many of their fellow-LDS clients) hold to be true. We will lead off by discussing these disciplinary assumptions in some detail, outlining each in terms of their intellectual origins and respective manifestations in contemporary psychological theory and practice, as well as exploring some of the necessary

implications for various important issues in therapy that they entail. We will also briefly explore alternative assumptive starting points to each of the three hidden assumptions, alternatives we believe are not only intellectually defensible, but which are also more harmonious with the revealed doctrines of the Restoration. Our purpose in doing this is to help facilitate a more fruitful and critically reflective (i.e., "self-aware") comparative analysis of competing conceptual frameworks and their respective philosophical, moral, theological and practical implications for Latter-day Saint psychologists and for the people we seek to serve.

To begin this analysis, it is important to first examine the assumption of scientific neutrality, or objectivism as it is sometimes termed. This is a particularly important place to start because it provides vital context that helps to explain why many LDS psychologists exhibit a basic lack of awareness and conceptual sophistication regarding the philosophical assumptions and professional values undergirding their discipline, its theory, research, methods, and aspirations.

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 belief and practices (see Hamilton, 2013; Tjeltveit, 1999). 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 (see, e.g., McLeod, 2017). When viewed in such a framework, the therapist as scientist-technician is able—through the proper application validated technique—in some fundamental way to transcend the realm of ordinary moral entanglement, as well as broader philosophical and theological concerns, and thereby provide a form of psychological healing freed from the distorting influences of subjectivity and the irrational, emotional sources of personal moral conviction or religious beliefs. Indeed, for many researchers, theorists, and practitioners, this scientistic approach to the question of values and religious belief was—and still is—advanced as the hallmark of competent, effective, and sound clinical practice (see, e.g., Baker et al., 2008; David et al., 2018).

However, at least since the publication of Allen Bergin's ground-breaking article, "Psychotherapy and Religious Values" in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 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 (see, e.g., Holmes and Lindley, 2018; Osbeck, 2019; Pargament, 2011; Proctor, 2014; Slife, 2004; Slife et al., 2003; Tjeltveit, 1999; Waring, 2016; Woolfolk, 1998). Psychologists have increasingly acknowledged that the nature and potential influence of therapists' *personal* values are an important topic of concern, and much professional discussion and training is focused on properly identifying, respecting, and responding to client values, especially religious and spiritual values (Hansen and Richards, 2012; Holmberg et al., 2021; Holmes and Lindley, 2018; Murphy and Hecker, 2017; Richards, 2006).

Despite 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 than eager to acknowledge or confront the role that professional or disciplinary values play in shaping practice. "I think it's important," practicing therapist Gerald Davison has said, "for therapists to be aware of their values, but more importantly to be aware that psychotherapy is a value-laden enterprise, and I think that most therapists are not aware of this. . . and the worshipping of the DSM, even by psychologists, has led to people overlooking or downplaying or losing

sight of the value judgments that enter into the decisions that people are better off if they're one way or the other" (cited in Williams and Levitt, 2007, p. 170).

At issue here is, as Pargament (2011) notes, the fact that "all forms of psychotherapy rest on values" (p. 22), not just that all therapists have their own personal values and moral, religious, or political commitments. Indeed, 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). While professional training has increasingly focused efforts on helping therapists to more intentionally identify, respect, and respond ethically to client values, as well as recognize and be transparent in therapy about their own values (Hansen and Richards, 2012), little if any serious attention is paid to the profound role that the professional values of the discipline, or what might be called its "philosophical values" (Al-Shawi, 2006), also play in psychotherapeutic theory and practice.

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. In one widely used textbook, Mann (2016) informs students that "because psychology is a science, it attempts to investigate the causes of human behavior using systematic, rigorous and objective procedures" (pp. 2-3). Similarly, Coon et al. (2022) state that "in contrast to superstition and pseudoscience, practicing science requires that we take an objective approach to answering questions using careful observation and experiments. The data we gather need to be evaluated impartially" (p. 15). Indeed, going beyond the claim that a scientific approach to psychology requires an objective approach, Cacioppo et al. (2022) assert:

> The word *psychology* is a combination of two Greek words: *psyche* (or *psuche*), or 'mind,' and *logos*, meaning 'the objective study of.' Literally translated, therefore, *psychology* means 'the objective study of the mind. Today, we define psychology as the scientific [objective] study of behavior, mental processes, and brain functions.' (p. 5)

It comes as no surprise, then, given these sorts of basic textbook proclamations, 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" (Slife et al., 2012), a very popular modern myth that stubbornly persists in the face of many decades of critical scholarly work thoroughly undermining its credibility (see, e.g., Brinkmann, 2009, 2011; Hamilton, 2013; Kincaid et al., 2007; Osbeck, 2019; Rose and Rose, 2014; Wilholt, 2009). 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). In short, whether explicitly endorsed or only implicitly accepted, most professional psychologists operate on the assumption that "it is science which tells us how the world really is" (p. 2)—that is, science gives us the facts of the world, and it does so in a way that avoids

the distorting and unreliable influences of values, personal biases, or subjective desire.

However, as Hall (2003) observes, “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. Indeed, Allen and Springsted (2007) echo this insight when they state, “what we think cannot be neatly separated from our selves, and what our selves are involves not only our deepest moral commitments but also the forms of life we share with others” (p. 233). It is for this reason, they contend, “the hard-and-fast distinction between facts and values that Hume insisted on is in the final analysis artificial and untenable” (p. 233). They further note that we only do science in the first place because “it has something to do with our values; we do it because we think it contributes to human flourishing in some sense” (p. 233). “Moreover,” they continue, “aesthetic considerations, such as simplicity and elegance, play considerable roles in determining the truth of scientific theories” (p. 233). And so, they conclude, “even science, which is [presumably] our most objective and factual study, is not free, nor should it be free, from considerations of value” (p. 233).

It is in this light, then, that we can see that 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. While one might well argue that the value of objectivity and value-neutrality are the best, or even most reasonable, values for the conduct of science in psychology, this does not in any way change the fact that they are still values. Indeed, such a claim only raises further questions about how one might establish in any unbiased way that neutrality is in fact the best approach to scientific inquiry, or defend an assertion of objectivism’s rational priority as a value in science in any non-question begging way (i.e., “objectivism is the most rational, and thus preferred, approach to science because objective science has rationally demonstrated that it is”). In short, objectivity is not itself objective and an epistemological stance in favor of value-neutrality is not a value-neutral stance. 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 (see May, 2021; Osbeck, 2019; Slife and Reber, 2009).

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 (e.g., conceptualize the sources and meaning of pathology, view the purpose of psychotherapy, relate to others, and understand the sources of meaning and healing upon which they might draw, etc.) but in naïve, unreflective, and often morally, philosophically, and theologically confused ways. Given the fact that clients are almost always seeking therapy in a state of psychological, emotional, relational, and spiritual vulnerability, and that therapists are capable of (however benignly) exerting tremendous persuasive influence on them in the context of therapy because of that vulnerability, it would seem to be of utmost importance that therapists themselves be very aware not only of their own personal values, but also of the hidden assumptions (i.e., philosophical values) of their profession generally. 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” (see also,

Slife et al., 2003). 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 most 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 (see Clark, 2016a; Goetz and Taliaferro, 2008; Griffin, 2000; Leahey, 1992; Slife, 2004; Viney and King, 2003). Furthermore, naturalism claims that "there are no ultimate or irreducible purposeful explanations of events, that there is no libertarian free will, and that there are no irreducible psychological or mental properties and events" (Goetz and Taliaferro, 2008, p. 25). 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 (Clark, 2016b).

The philosophy of naturalism has become, as historian of psychology Thomas Leahey has noted, "science's central dogma" (Leahey, 1992, p. 379). "Within Western culture," Dembski (1998) and others have observed, "naturalism has become the default position for all serious inquiry" (p. 14; see also Clark 2016a; Harrison and Roberts 2019; MacIntyre 2009; Marsden 1997). This is so much the case that, 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. For example, the fact that naturalism is a set of philosophical assumptions with a fairly clear intellectual pedigree, as well as a long history of sustained and reasonable critique from both within and without the sciences (see, e.g., Bartlett and Holloway, 2016; Caro and Macarthur, 2004; Goetz and Taliaferro, 2008; Gordon and Dembski, 2014; Harrison and Roberts, 2019), is almost never mentioned in standard textbooks, especially those devoted to research methods and scientific explanation. Rather, naturalism is the great, often unacknowledged warrant behind many of their arguments. Naturalism's concepts and conceits pervade mainstream understandings of the nature of science, appropriate investigatory methods, and the proper role of theory and practice, often serving to bridge the otherwise wide gaps that separate varied disciplinary areas of interest from one another. Because naturalism is not only the overarching intellectual framework out of which most contemporary intellectual discourse originates, but also the conceptual arena within which such discourse takes place, it provides the metaphysical, epistemological, and even ethical grounding for much of our modern world, as well as our self-understanding in it.

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 and 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* re-

ducible 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, and its many problematic implications, 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. (p. 7)

Of course, there is nothing in this view that assumes that all such laws or principles have already been discovered or discerned, only that such laws exist and govern all natural events. Ultimately, however, naturalism maintains that such inescapably material events are the only sort of events there are—or, at least, the only sort of events that can truly matter because they are the only sort of events that can be known with any degree of certainty given default epistemological assumptions about what sorts of things can be known. Thus, we can see that psychology, as a science of human beings, their behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and relationships, is clearly patterned in its assumptions, methods, and aspirations after the more established natural sciences (Proctor and Capaldi, 2006; Slife and Williams, 1995), and, as such, it constitutes a systematic attempt to account for human phenomena solely in terms of natural events governed by natural laws in much the same way we find in disciplines such as physics and biology (see, e.g., Evans and Rooney, 2008; Heiman, 2001). Indeed, the noted historian of psychology Thomas Leahey (1992) contends that "physics envy" (p. 24) is one of the central hallmarks of modern psychology.

Additionally, 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. That is, if scientific understanding requires the presumption that all events in the world are natural events, governed by mechanical laws and physical forces, and that to be legitimately scientific psychological accounts must be naturalistic accounts, then human actions can only be seen as necessarily determined actions, or actions in which persons play no meaningful, active, purposive, or participatory role. Human acts are simply rendered as natural, necessarily determined events—that is, events that happen to beings who are acted upon, rather than events that flow out of the acts and choices of beings who act in intentional and genuinely meaningful ways.

For psychologists operating within the naturalistic framework, it is obvious that since human beings are part of the natural world, "who we are and what we do must ultimately be understood in naturalistic terms" (Dembski, 1998, p. 14). Interpreting human nature and behavior in naturalistic terms is not usually intended to constitute a denial of our humanity—though such criticisms of naturalism have been made (see, e.g., Craig and Moreland, 2000; Goetz and Taliaferro, 2008; Olafson, 2001). Rather, most advocates of the naturalistic perspective in psychology view their work as a continuation of a distinctly humanistic tradition of inquiry that first arose during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods (Smith, 1997); or what some scholars have termed "humanistic naturalism" (see Edwards, 2001). Thus, instead of denying our humanity, these scholars seek to establish psychology as a species of natural science, committing it to naturalistic forms of inquiry and explanation so as to "reinterpret our humanity as the

consequence of brute material processes that were not consciously aiming at us" (Dembski, 1998, p. 14). In other words, such scholars seek to articulate a psychological science of what we might call the "merely human." That is, most psychologists would readily agree that their discipline is best described as the *scientific study of behavior*, an intellectual endeavor 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 (see, e.g., Coon et al., 2022; Cacioppo et al., 2022; Kalat, 2022; Kavanaugh, 2024; Myers and DeWall, 2020). 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 a naturalistic account of the 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.

Much the same intellectual spirit animates disciplinary discussions of research method, assessment, and measurement, discussions that are almost always content to focus entirely on matters of objective data collection, operational definition, variable manipulation, experimental control, and causal inference (see, e.g., Coolican, 2024; Heath, 2018; Morling, 2026). The underlying naturalistic presumption of such treatments is that only those things that exist in some quantity, and can be measured in some objective fashion, truly exist in any meaningful way, and that things that exist in some measurable quantity exist in deterministic ways that are discernable to the experimentally focused scientific eye.

Likewise, many of the ways in which psychopathology is conceptualized, as well as the ways in which therapeutic techniques for the treatment of psychological and emotional suffering are formulated, reveals a framing philosophical value-bias towards naturalism. For example, many popular approaches to treating psychopathologies begin and end with pharmacological interventions. These approaches assume that since psychological phenomena such as thoughts and emotions are really just manifestations of underlying neurochemical function, then disturbed or disturbing thoughts and emotions must be nothing more than neurochemical dysfunction. In this common, psychiatric medical model of mental disorder, then, persons are ultimately seen to be little more than "meat machines"—to use a famous phrase coined by artificial intelligence researcher Marvin Minsky (cited in Clark, 2001)—who have "broken down" in some way and, thus, are malfunctioning, suffering from one or another form of "chemical imbalance." Other, less biologically reductive therapeutic approaches, while rejecting an explicitly medical model, nonetheless often endorse a mechanical and naturalistic view of the client. Thus, they often seek to elucidate the intrapsychic, developmental, or environmental causes of

the person's suffering, and approach treatment solely in terms of learning to control and manipulate such causal conditions for one's own benefit; or, in some cases, learning to resign oneself to the reality of such causal conditions and accept their inevitability by mastering appropriately effective coping mechanisms.

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—and which, as such, are not ultimately reducible to the causal interactions of material entities and causal variables—is ruled out long before any serious investigation is undertaken (Slife and Reber, 2009). 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 (Slife and Reber, 2021). 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. As social psychologists Krueger and Grünning (2025) pointedly observe, while the larger academic community has yet to achieve consensus on the question of human agency:

> most experimentalists, however, we presume are closet determinists. How could they go on doing experiments on human behavior if they didn't think they could determine that behavior . . . An experimentalist who induces a stronger belief in free will to study the effects on pro- or antisocial behavior is making a deterministic prediction. (p. 103)

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.

Given that so many of our contemporary therapeutic practices are grounded in the naturalistic worldview of modern science, it is no surprise that they too often reflect an understanding of psychological suffering in which persons are beings that are "subject to" powerful forces and conditions existing mostly outside of their control, active participation, or even awareness (thus the need for professional intervention by a trained expert in such matters). The possibility that our therapy clients are divine beings, endowed with moral agency and an exquisite sensitivity to more than imminent meaning and purpose in their lives, is not a possibility seriously entertained by any mainstream theories or models found in contemporary psychotherapy (Jones and Butman, 2011). Indeed, even those therapeutic perspectives that do seem to value agency and choice, tend to do so in highly individualized and profoundly subjective ways. In other words, moral sensibility and agency are located in the fundamentally relativistic sphere of individual autonomy, wherein the individual's choices spring entirely from a self-contained inner realm and in which the individual is ultimately answerable only to themselves for their choices. As we will discuss later, this view is the foundation for much of contemporary psychology's concern with self-acceptance, self-love, and the ethos of personal authenticity.

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—accounts upon which most of our therapeutic interventions are founded—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 again 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). Indeed, Milgram continues, "the creative claim of social psychology lies in its capacity . . . to clarify and make visible the operation of obscure social forces so that they may be explored in terms of the language of cause and effect" (Milgram, 1992, 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 (Williams et al., 2021). Such a view of human beings is one in which human beings are entirely immanent 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 immanent forces and conditions (e.g., genetic predispositions, neurochemical activity, psychological need, or cultural upbringing).

Unfortunately, there is simply no non-question begging way in which the problematic impact of naturalism can be resolved with the methods of science. After all, the issue at hand here is not an empirical or scientific one, but rather a philosophical (and theological) one. Indeed, as Alexander and Shelton (2014) observe:

> It is also sometimes supposed that psychological perspectives must be scientifically proven, but this is definitely not so. Since the philosophical breakthroughs of Immanuel Kant two centuries ago, historians, sociologists, and philosophers of knowledge have increasingly come to agree that the basic assumptions of physical and social science have *not* been empirically or rationally proven. (p. 4)

Thus, because science is not itself up to the task of independent critical self-examination and the adjudication of its own founding premises, careful philosophical (and theological) reflection and attention is required. As Slife and Williams (1995) argue, scientific psychology cannot justify itself by appealing to itself for justification; for, "just as those who wear old-fashioned boots cannot raise themselves into the air by pulling on the straps of their boots, so scientific method cannot use its own methods to validate the methods it is using" (pp. 4-5). Thus, the first step in carrying out a more fruitful, and critically reflective examination requires us to consider an alternative conceptual grounding to that of scientific naturalism. However, it is important to note that this is not so that we can simply replace the philosophical value of naturalism with some other, more objective or value-neutral philosophical value. Indeed, the idea of a value-neutral value is absurd. Rather, it is simply to admit that intellectually viable alternative foundations for psychological understanding are possible, and that there are alternative foundations that do; one that does not in-

herently dismiss (prior to reasoned scientific inquiry and careful observation) the possible reality of transcendence, meaning, morality, human purpose, or the intimate involvement of a loving God in the very fiber of our lives.

Unfortunately, given naturalism's denial of the possibility that human beings possess any divine nature or genuinely agentic capacities, as well as the possibility that a fully relational God exists and interacts with His children, many LDS psychologists have opted for an intellectual position in which they compartmentalize or detach their faith from the scientific worldview and values of their discipline, effectively keeping their religious beliefs, experiences, and perspectives cordoned off as merely private matters that have no legitimate place in their professional practice. This approach to addressing the intellectual (and moral and theological) tension between the naturalism of the discipline of psychology and the rival, spiritual worldview of the Restored Gospel is occasionally, informally referred to as the "two hats" strategy. That is, the religious psychologist takes her faith commitments very seriously when moving through life as an ordinary, active member of her religious community. However, when functioning as a professional researcher or therapist, she sets aside her religious beliefs and the various metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical commitments those beliefs might entail, instead "donning" a separate "hat," or set of beliefs and metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical commitments, in the service of scientific objectivity and value-neutrality.

The "two hats" strategy, however, reflects as sort of pernicious intellectual schizophrenia, one in which it is assumed that one can move easily between rival worldviews simply by slipping in and out of a social role, or that by doing so one can avoid dealing directly with the antithetical assumptions and implications each worldview has for the other. What often goes unrecognized in adopting the "two hats" strategy, however, is that the separation of faith and science in professional practice is not itself a neutral strategy. Rather, it actually reflects a host of typically unexamined naturalistic assumptions and values; for example, the epistemological prioritization of reason over revelation, of skepticism over personal experience, tradition, and spiritual authority, the postulation of an unbridgeable ontological gap between things spiritual and things material, the myth of neutrality and that that only empirical means yield objective truth, and so forth.

Of particular concern for LDS psychologists should be that the "two hats" strategy seems to fly in the face of Elder Marion G. Romney's (1966) apostolic admonition that we are to be disciple-scholars and, therefore, "We are obligated to interpret the content of secular subjects in the light of revealed truth." Likewise, President Spencer W. Kimball (1967) invited LDS scholars and professionals to always bathe their subjects (and, by implication, their professional conduct) "in the light and color of the restored gospel." And, perhaps most strenuously, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (2012) taught that "for the establishment of Zion in the 21st century: You *never* 'check your religion at the door.' Not ever . . . we are 'to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that [w]e may be in,' *not* just some of the time, in a few places. . . ."

Theism as Alternative to Naturalism

In light of such prophetic counsel, then, it would seem necessary for us to explore possible alternative philosophical assumptions upon which to found psychological research, theorizing, and therapeutic efforts, alternative assumptions that do not fall prey to the limitations of naturalism and which do not require either a "two hats" strategy or 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.

Furthermore, the God envisioned in this sort of theism is not the god of traditional deism, or what Slife et al. (2010) call "weak theism." The god of deism is one whose involvement in the world ends with the moment of creation—a sort of Aristotelian prime-mover who is only needed to get the world up and running, but who thereafter, like a detached cosmic watchmaker, is no longer necessary for the cosmic clock's ongoing operations. Weak theism offers up a god so distant and uninvolved, and so absolutely other than, that "Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui* [i.e., the god of the philosophers, the uncaused cause], man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god" (Heidegger, 1969, p. 60). One can easily invoke such a god in one's causal account of the origins of the universe, but one does not—indeed, one cannot—love such a god, and neither can one be loved by such a god. Presumably, the reason the creator god of deism is no longer necessary once the moment of creation is finished is because the operations of the created world are from that point on governed by requisite natural laws and mechanical forces originally postulated in the philosophy of naturalism. Psychological perspectives that reduce God to a merely psychological reality, the consequence of some underlying unmet psychological or emotional need, the sociological consequences of a natural history of the evolutionary struggle to survive and reproduce, or simply as some distant and uninvolved "first cause," reflect the attempt to combine theism and naturalism. However, in so doing, they relegate God—especially the God of the Restoration—to a subsidiary role and maintain naturalistic values and assumptions in a privileged position.

In the strong theistic perspective, however, 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 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 and psychotherapy, "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" (p. 5). The prophet Smith et al. (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 inclu-

sion of this assumption changes the nature of the other [naturalistic] assumptions, sometime radically" (p. 165).

It is important, however, to make two clarifying points here to head off any misunderstanding of what is implied in this strong theistic view. First, it is not the case that a therapist who adopted a theistic approach would then assume that God's activity or involvement in the world, particularly in the world of the client and in the context of therapy, constituted "a sufficient cause or condition of all events" (Slife et al., 2010, p. 167). There are some therapists practicing "biblical counseling" who adopt such a position, reducing all psychological matters to spiritual problems which are, in turn, held to fixable by simply increased study of and application of biblical scripture (Wilkens and Sanford, 2009). In such practices, one's relationship to God is sufficient to explain and fix all psychological problems. However, it is reasonable to suggest that other psychological and social factors, even biological ones, may play a role in the course and outcome of therapy—not to mention the client's own agency. In the theistic perspective we are suggesting here, God is "viewed as at least one of several *necessary* conditions—part of a larger whole, but as necessary as any other part to understand the whole and all the other parts or factors" (Slife et al., 2010, p. 167).

In short, in this strongly theistic view, as opposed to that of naturalism, God is absolutely vital to any adequate investigation into or subsequent understanding of human psychology and for any conception of psychotherapy or healing (see, e.g., Gantt and Melling, 2009; Reber, 2006; Reber et al., 2012; Williams and Gantt, 2020). 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 (see, e.g., Richards, 2006; Slife et al., 2010, 2012). 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.

A second important point that also needs to be made here make is that strong theism, at least as we envision it here, asserts an actively involved and intimately relational God as the foundation of the world, and, thus, constitutes a rejection of the premise of naturalism that impersonal natural laws govern all events in the world. This should not be taken to mean, however, that such a version of theism implies that there is no orderliness or intelligibility to the world. Embracing a living, relational God who is a moral agent in His own right does not require giving up on the idea that knowledge is impossible because the will of God is inscrutable, nor does it mandate a world of inexplicable and mysterious events. Rejecting the notion that the fundamental reality of the universe is a set of abstract, impersonal, and mechanical laws acting on brute matter does not entail a rejection of lawfulness or predictability, per se. Rather, it locates orderliness and intelligibility in the ordered and intelligible, not to mention compassionate and merciful, character of God Himself (see, e.g., D&C 88:42-44). In other words, the world operates in a predictable and rationally ordered manner, not because of the mechanical and impersonal necessity presumed by naturalism, but because of a loving, compassionate, just and rational God who cares for His children and seeks to provide them a world in which they can come to know Him as they work out their salvation with Him. The God of the theistic alternative we are suggesting here is one whose moral, emotional, and intellectual character is solid, enduring, and infinitely reliable. He is faithful to His children and true to His promises, and the world he created and sustains in its physical, psychological, and rationally intelligible and moral reality reflects His character.

The Philosophical Value of Determinism

As a philosophical value, naturalism has a number of associated philosophical values, one of which is a logical consequence of the basic

assumptions of the naturalistic perspective: necessary determinism. Typically, the natural sciences define determinism as "natural laws [that] are strictly determinative of future consequences, so that given one initial state of a physical system, at a definite time later there is one and only one outcome possible" (Weatherford, 1991, p. 3). For example, astronomers can take the exact positions, velocities, and masses of the Earth, Moon, and Sun at a given moment in time (i.e., the "initial state") and invoking the Newton's laws of gravity and motion, they can calculate exactly where those bodies will be at any future time. Following the conceptual lead of the natural sciences, psychologists commonly understand determinism, as Baer (2008) states, to be the "belief that events, including acts of the will, occurrences in nature, and social or psychological phenomena, are causally determined by preceding events and natural laws. Determinism assumes that all events in the universe, including all things that happen in human minds, follow laws of causality" (p. 305). Indeed, Baer (2008) continues, determinism is what "makes psychology possible. If psychological events were not determined—caused—by antecedent events, psychology could make no sense" (p. 309). In a similar vein, Howard (2008) argues:

> If you want to be a scientist, you better be a determinist. Things are (and act) the way they are (and act) because something(s) caused them to be (or act) that way. It is a proper job for a scientist to find and document (via experimental studies) the cause-effect relations that form and guide human actions. (p. 261)

Thus, in a way akin to that of astronomers, psychologists begin with a person's initial mental state at a given moment—such as their past learning history, current emotional condition, stored memories, and presenting stimuli—and, invoking certain psychological laws (like conditioning, reinforcement, and cognitive processing), seek to predict how that person will respond in a future situation. As Shrout (2011) asserts, "Both in psychopathology research and in clinical practice, causal thinking is natural and productive. . . . When clinicians understand the causal nature of treatments, they can have confidence that their actions will lead to positive outcomes" (p. 3).

In this approach, human beings are essentially rendered as natural objects—albeit very, very complex ones—who behave as they do because they must. In other words, their behavior is the necessary result of the material and environmental (i.e., physical) contexts in which they find themselves and in which particular natural forces happen to be operating. That is, human beings are assumed to be reactive organisms who possess no really agency of their own, and thus, consistent with the assumption of naturalism, all human action (i.e., behaviors, feelings, thoughts, etc.) is presumed to be caused by its antecedent (i.e., causal) conditions, and in essentially the way that the behavior of other objects in the world are made to behave as they do by their particular antecedent conditions.

This is not to say that human beings actually experience themselves as objects being acted upon impersonal causal forces, only that at a basic conceptual level mainstream psychological theories take them to be such, and attempt to explain their thoughts, feelings, and actions accordingly. Thus, a psychologist might point out that a person who checks their phone immediately upon hearing a notification may feel as though they freely chose to do so, but their behavior can be adequately explained as the result of their prior conditioning history (i.e., repeated rewards that trained them to associate notifications with pleasure). In this view, the person's action is not truly self-originating, agentic, or intentional (it only feels that way subjectively) because it was in fact caused by antecedent factors like reinforcement history and neural responses. Thus, even though the person experiences the act as freely chosen, mainstream psychological theory (assuming determinism) would explain it as the predictable outcome of prior conditions acting on the person.

For many psychologists, the scientific legitimacy of their entire discipline, as well as its principle scientific goals (i.e., predicting, controlling, and explaining behavior), and the warrant for its interventions and therapies, hinges on the assumption of necessary determinism. Indeed, it seems to be more or less the consensus of the mainstream of the discipline that, because "all sciences assume

determinism" (Hergenhahn and Henley, 2014, p. 7), psychology must also assume determinism if it is to be properly accounted a science. But why might this be the case? Why is the doctrine of necessary determinism deemed to be so vital to the scientific project of psychology? Psychological research methodologist, Heiman (2001) argues that the dogma of determinism is central to psychological science because:

> If, instead, we assumed that organisms freely decide their behavior, then behavior truly would be chaotic, because the only explanation for every behavior would be 'because he or she wanted to.' Therefore, we reject the idea that free will plays a role. After all, you cannot walk off a cliff and 'will' yourself not to fall, because the law of gravity forces you to fall. Anyone else in the same situation will also fall because that is how gravity operates. Likewise, we assume that you cannot freely choose to exhibit a particular personality or respond in a particular way in a given situation. The laws of behavior force you to have certain attributes and to behave in a certain way in a given situation. Anyone else in that situation will be similarly influenced, because that is how the laws of behavior operate. (p. 7)

In short, there are only two options available to us for explaining human action: (1) either all human events are determined by causal necessity to be as they are and as they must be, or (2) no events are determined to be anything in anyway, and are simply random, indeterminate—and, thus, fundamentally inexplicable—occurrences. Obviously, given such options—intelligibility versus inscrutability—it is no surprise that advocates for a science of behavior adopt a deterministic framework for making sense of the human beings they study. Fortunately, this characterization of the issue is a false dichotomy, and, thus, misleading. There are intellectually viable conceptualizations of agency that neither reduce it to unpredictable, whimsical autonomy nor to mere illusion (see, e.g., Guignon, 2002; Pedersen, 2020; Taylor, 1989; Williams, 2005, 2017; Williams and Gantt, 2022; Williams et al., 2021; Yanchar, 2011, 2018).

So What?

An obvious question at this point would be: So what? What does it really matter if our investigatory methods and therapeutic approaches are grounded in theories that assume a necessarily deterministic world—especially, if such approaches "work" (i.e., do what we want them to do)? In short, what difference does it make whether our therapies are rooted in naturalism and determinism if people leave our office happier, more content, less guilt-ridden, more aware of their own needs, and in greater control of their lives?

While certainly legitimate questions to ask, it is important to note that the origins of such questions can often be traced to a disciplinary culture that values pragmatism, though seldom of the fully thought-out philosophical sort found in the works of such figures as William James, C. S. Peirce, or Hilary Putnam (see Talisse and Aikin, 2011). Psychology's professional value of what we might call "simple pragmatism" reflects a commitment to taking an eclectic, practical, or "good old common sense" approach to solving problems, focusing on "whatever works" rather than chasing after rigid, abstract, or complex speculative theories. While such an approach is not necessarily objectionable or unreasonable on its face, many psychologists seem to have adopted this sort of pragmatic approach as a way of sidestepping thorny philosophical and metaphysical issues by simply allowing predictive success or the achievement of particular desired therapeutic outcomes to justify practice (see, e.g., Borden, 2021; Finkel et al., 2015; Wampold and Imel, 2015).

Unfortunately, although perhaps appealing at first, adopting a pragmatic perspective entails its own set of thorny conceptual and ethical issues, and reveals not the detached and objective, value-neutral and a-theoretical approach it suggests, but rather a deeply value-laden view significantly rooted in naturalism. A reliance on "whatever works" as one's criteria for determining the appropriateness of a given therapeutic approach only really "works" if we have all already agreed on

what actually constitutes "working," how success is to be evaluated, and along what dimensions such evaluation will take place. That is, we can all agree that a particular therapeutic model, or set of techniques and interventions, "work" only so long as we all share the same underlying value commitments, and avoid questioning them. Thus, it might well look like a given approach to research or therapy "works" (e.g., by reducing symptoms, elevating levels of self-acceptance and self-esteem, manifesting more effective use of relationship management strategies, etc.) but only if we have already assumed that naturalistic criteria for establishing therapeutic success are unproblematic and objectively superior to any other criteria. This, however, is impossible to do in any non-question begging way. We simply cannot detach ourselves from the difficult conceptual issues surrounding naturalism and necessary determinism, and thereby pretend to objectivity and value-neutrality, by invoking a commitment only to "what works" when "what works" is defined in terms dictated by naturalism and determinism.

A second response to the "so what?" question is that it matters deeply how we understand our clients, their nature, their possibilities, and the purpose and meaning of their lives. It just is a fact that respondent organisms, driven about by needs, biochemical impulses, and environmental stimuli (i.e., the sorts of beings the naturalistic assumption of necessary determinism envisions us to be), what we early termed "meat machines," fundamentally exist in different ways than do embodied moral agents. Meat machines have different problems than moral agents, and those problems demand different conceptualizations and different solutions. Such beings have different responsibilities and obligations, they are capable of aspiring to different goods, they relate to one another in different ways, and a "flourishing life" for a moral agent is fundamentally different than it is for a respondent, natural organism.

The psychologist who sees her research subjects or therapy clients and their thoughts, feelings, and actions as nothing more than the result of complex natural events and deterministic forces is a psychologist whose psychology has no real space for exploring meaningful moral obligations, transcendent spiritual experiences, aspirations greater than "management of the creature" (Alma 30:17), or truly social and familial relationships. Such a psychologist is in no position to assist moral agents in the great work of discovering what it means to be human, much less what it means to be made in the image of a loving God who has sent us here at this time to work out who exactly it is we are intended to be, what genuinely meaningful purpose in life might look like, and how our suffering and the suffering of others might have meaning in the context of the atonement of Christ. Why might this be the case? Quite simply because in the framing of naturalism and determinism such things as meaning, purpose, moral agency, and a loving God either do not in fact exist or are held to be no real importance.

A final response to the "so what?" question notes that how we come down on the necessary determinism issue ultimately dictates how we come down on the issue of meaning. One inescapable consequence of the philosophical assumption of necessary determinism is that human actions, our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, have no intrinsic or genuine meaning (Williams and Gantt, 2022; Williams et al., 2021). When a human act is accounted for solely in terms of underlying efficient causal forces and the necessity of mechanical operations the act is as it must be. Further, the act could not have been otherwise than it was given the antecedent conditions and causal forces responsible for producing it. Because such an act is purely reflexive or mechanical in nature—like an eye blink in response to a puff of air or a knee jerk in response to the tap of a ball-peen hammer to the patellar tendon—it has no intrinsic meaning or significance, moral or otherwise (Slife and Williams, 1995). It just is what it is, and nothing more. Such acts are incapable of sustaining any claim to meaningfulness because meaning *requires possibility* (see, e.g., Gantt et al., 2013; Guignon, 2002; Martin and Sugarman, 1999; Martin et al., 2003; Slife and Williams, 1995; Williams, 2005, 2017; Williams and Gantt, 2022; Williams et al., 2021).

In brief, then, for an event to be truly meaningful it must be possible for that event to be otherwise than it is. Events that are necessarily determined are simply incapable of carrying forth any genuine or intrinsic meaning. This issue can per-

haps be illustrated if we consider the tropisms of certain plants, the leaves of which slowly and mechanically bend and change position relative to the location of the sun as it moves across the sky. As a necessitated event it simply is what it is and has no inherent meaning because there is no possibility for it to have been otherwise. Granted, someone who enjoys gardening and who is interested in plants and their "behavior" might find the movement personally meaningful for any number of reasons. However, that some particular event can be meaningful to someone external to the organism actually doing the moving does not render that organism's movement meaningful in itself. Thus, in the case of human behavior, only if persons are—in some fundamental sense—genuinely capable of both intending and acting otherwise than they do is it possible for any real meaning to be ascribed to their behavior.

The formal term for the worldview in which events have no intrinsic or non-contingent meaning is nihilism, or what we might call "meaning death" (Gantt and Williams, 2021) The inescapable logical consequence of necessary determinism is that our lives and relationships have no intrinsic meaning, purpose, or moral depth and significance. The ideal of the "flourishing life" in such a perspective rises no higher than learning to cope in some way with the pointlessness of it all, perhaps by means of some self-created (and, thus, contingent) meaning or some personally satisfying version of hedonism (Gantt and Williams, 2014). (Though, in the end, what does it really matter anyway if everything is pointless?) For beings who are in fact moral agents, beings for whom meaning and morality, reason and purpose, relationship and responsibility are the warp and woof of existence and reflective of their very ontological nature, such a soul-numbing and dismal view simply will not do.

Moral Agency as Alternative to Necessary Determinism

Because many other, more capable authors have already written extensively on moral agency as a philosophical value alternative to necessary determinism (see, e.g., Gantt et al., 2013; Guignon, 2002; Martin and Sugarman, 1999; Martin et al., 2003; Slife and Williams, 1995; Taylor, 1989; Williams, 2005, 2017), we will only briefly sketch out the contours of the position here. The first, and perhaps the most basic, conceit of the moral agency position is that genuinely human acts are characterized by their possibility; that is, genuinely human acts are acts that can be otherwise than they in fact are. Necessitated actions are by their very nature without possibility and, thus, without intrinsic meaning because meaning arises out of possibility in that it is possibility that allows us to distinguish one thing from another.

For example, we are able to rightly describe the actions of a bystander who runs into a burning building to rescue individuals trapped there as heroic rather than, say, cowardly, indecisive, or apathetic only because they could genuinely have done otherwise by acting cowardly, indecisively, or apathetically in that particular situation. That the bystander opted to charge into a burning building to render aid to helpless victims when other, very real possibilities for action (and inaction) existed is precisely what makes their actions meaningful acts of heroism. If, in this particular situation, the bystander could not have done otherwise than rush into the building—or, for that matter, stood aside and done nothing—then it is simply not viable to ascribe any genuine meaning to her actions. The bystander's behavior is simply what it is and could not have been otherwise, thus their behavior possesses no intrinsic meaning or moral significance. Absent both real possibilities and the capacity to act "freely" in some important way, their behavior could no more be legitimately considered "heroic" than that of a boulder that happened to fall down a hillside, striking and killing a passing hiker could be legitimately considered murderous. Even the sense that something "tragic" had occurred would be merely subjective in nature, and not something intrinsic to the event itself. Indeed, even more deeply, if our subjective sense that the hiker's death by falling boulder is a tragedy is itself the product of causally necessitated brain states, unconscious psychological needs, or environmental conditioning, then it too possesses no intrinsic meaning because it too is merely meaningless happenstance. This condition is the very essence of nihilism.

The central importance of possibility we are pointing to here does not mean, however, that hu-

man actions and choices are infinitely and equally probable, that they are unconstrained in any way whatsoever, or that they spring from nowhere and reflect only indeterminate, arbitrary willfulness. That is, preserving possibility as a core aspect of human action does not require us to endorse indeterminism, or the view that human actions are simply expressions of an unfettered, ungrounded, and fundamentally autonomous will whose actions are, thus, arbitrary, whimsical, and ultimately random and inscrutable to reason. As numerous other thinkers have shown (see, e.g., Guignon, 2002; Martin and Sugarman, 1999; Martin et al., 2003; Pedersen, 2020; Williams, 2005, 2017; Williams and Gantt, 2022), indeterminism (or what is often articulated under the banner of libertarianism or "free will") is not a viable alternative to necessary determinism, primarily because it leads to the very same nihilistic outcome as necessary determinism. After all, it is no more reasonable to ascribe meaning or purpose to behavior if moral agency is just arbitrary or random act than it is if behavior is the product of some determinative, causal system. As Dupré (1993) notes:

> a solution to the problem of freedom of the will is not to be obtained by replacing the picture of a person as mindless machinery with that of a random action generator. The idea that people act for reasons seems more reconcilable with an account under which those reasons turn out to be nothing but states of the machine, than one which seems to preclude other causes or reasons by placing the action wholly beyond explanation. Nor is it helpful to move from determinism to a probabilistic uniformitarianism that claims that human actions are not determined by antecedent physical conditions, but only made more or less probable. This sounds not so much like an account of a (metaphysically) free person, as of a somewhat unreliable one. (pp. 214-215)

Ultimately, then, a random act has no more meaning intrinsic to it than does a necessitated, determined one. In the end, what matters for the advocate of moral agency is that human actions are understood as always and inescapably situated in meaningful and relational contexts that are characterized not only by their possibility but also by their various constraints (Martin and Sugarman, 1999). Indeed, in such a perspective, much of the real work of psychological theory, research, and therapy takes place as we acknowledge some of the salient constraints at play in our lives—physical, social, moral, and spiritual—even as we explore and learn to embrace (often latent) new possibilities for living our lives and relating to others in more morally fruitful and truthful ways (Williams, 2005). And, since our capacity for moral and purposive action is not reducible to some other, more basic non-agentic process or entity (whether physical or environmental in nature) that would rob it of its essential meaningful and intentional nature, moral agency constitutes a fundamental starting point for making sense of human nature, existence, and purpose.

That is, whereas the philosophical values of naturalism and necessary determinism begin by postulating that persons are products of an impersonal, mechanical order characterized by efficient causality and meaninglessness, the philosophical value of moral agency (at least the sort we are describing here) starts with the claim that we are first and foremost "preexistent, eternal, intelligent beings" (Williams, 2005, p. 133). In other words, our capacity for intentional, purposive, and, thus, meaningful and moral action is "not a derived attribute merely coincidentally attached to us through some more fundamental entity or process. Nor does it evolve over time from something more primitive. It is the very essence of our being" (Williams, 2005, p. 133). In short, we are primordially purposive, morally situated, agentic beings whose lives are intimately and inextricably constituted in meaningful ways and through relationships with other such beings, including God Himself. As such beings, at our most basic ontological level, we are (as Father Lehi taught his sons centuries ago) the sorts of beings who act rather than the sort who are only acted upon (2 Ne. 2:14). Thus, our lives are fraught with meaning, with purpose, and with moral texture and responsibility.

Before moving on from this point, however, we wish to reiterate that moral agency (as we are describing it here) is not synonymous with unbounded autonomy or libertarian free will. It is imperative that we emphasize this point because we believe that many thoughtful LDS psychologists may have tried to adopt a position radically opposed to necessary determinism in order to save human agency because they also recognize its vital importance to understanding ourselves and others. It is, for example, not uncommon to hear LDS psychologists (as well as laymen) use the phrase "free agency," a hybrid of the scriptural term "moral agency" and the philosophical concept of "free will." The account of agency we are arguing for here, however, endorses neither inescapable constraint (i.e., necessary determinism) nor infinite, unbounded possibility (i.e., free will indeterminism). Rather, the account of moral agency we are sketching out here is that human freedom and meaning are congenitally situated at the crossroads of *both* possibility and constraint.

Indeed, it is vital that we never lose sight of the fact that moral agency is not only situated at the confluence of the possibilities and constraints of language, culture, history, personal experience, and moral context, but that it also always *embodied* moral agency. That is, moral agency is always profoundly grounded by our embodiment and our intimate enmeshment in the physical world (see Henry, 2015; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Taylor, 1989; Varela et al., 2016). In other words, the view of moral agency we offer here as an alternative philosophical value to determinism is one that is radically holistic in its approach to conceptualizing and understanding human behavior, feelings, and thought (Yanchar, 2013). In essence, our claim here is that the lived-body—as opposed to the "objective body" that is a complex biomechanical machine—is essential to making sense of our agency, as it serves as one of the necessary (though not sufficient) conditions within which moral agency and meaning are possible and can operate. The lived-body functions as both a site of meaningful possibilities and a constraint on our intentions, relationships, and meanings, one of many necessary conditions of moral agency to be at all. Before the body is an object, and thus before psychology's tendency to envision persons as "meat machines" who are helplessly bandied about by various occult forces of nature, we are living bodies, embodied moral agents existing in and through the chiastic intertwining of body and world, perception and action, and subject and object. Thus, as an alternative to the mechanical metaphysics inherent in naturalistic psychology's legacy of deterministic explanation, we suggest a fundamentally holistic ontology of intersubjectivity and enmeshment—of self, others, and world inescapably entangled in possibility, constraint, meaning, moral valence, purpose and interpersonal relationship (Brown and Holbrook, 2015). Agency, then, at least as we are describing it here, is not so much some "thing" that we do or do not possess as it is the very essence of who, what, and how we are. In short, to be an embodied moral agent is precisely what it means to be human, to be a literal child of Heavenly Parents who themselves are also embodied moral agents.

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. In other words, it is one thing to grant that all behavior is necessarily determined according to the operations of certain natural laws, principles, or conditions, but it is another entirely to explain what it is that initially causes human beings to act, to behave as they do in particular instances. In its quest to provide such an explanation, contemporary psychological theory, drawing inspiration from Newtonian physics, has typically sought to account for human behavior in terms of motivational forces such as instinctual urges, biological drives, psychological needs, reinforcement contingencies, chemical impulses, environmental stimuli, and other such powerful motivating forces (Gantt and Williams, 2014).

As Deckers (2022) notes in his recent text-

book, "to be motivated is to be moved into action, or into a change in action" (p. 2) because one has been "induced or moved into action or thought toward some end-state by either the push of a motive or the pull of an incentive or goal" (p. 10). Like the Newtonian proposition that any object at rest will remain at rest unless acted upon by some motive force compelling it to behave in some way, many perspectives in contemporary psychology similarly understand human behavior as requiring some manner of motive force to compel the individual person into action. Indeed, as Reeve (2025) notes in his recent introductory textbook on motivation, "Motivation's most fundamental question is this: What causes behavior? Or, stated in terms of a *Why?* question: Why did she do that? . . . Motivation exists as a scientific field to identify those hidden causes of behavior" (p. 5, italics in the original). Echoing these sentiments, Gorman (2004) states in a similar introductory text, "motivation is concerned with complex processes that *move* individuals towards some goal, to try and understand the forces that push them into action" (p. 2). The Newtonian influence here seems undeniable.

It is in the context of psychology's interest in motivation that the philosophical value of psychological egoism is perhaps most clearly manifest. Intimately related to the philosophical values of naturalism and necessary determinism, 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. Though related in various ways, the doctrine of psychological egoism is not synonymous with hedonism, generally, or ethical hedonism, more specifically. In brief, hedonism (from the Greek *hēdonē*, meaning "pleasure") simply refers to the pursuit of or devotion to pleasure, however defined in any specific case. Ethical hedonism, on the other hand, is the thesis that pleasure itself is the highest good in life, and, thus, the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain are the highest morals principles of human behavior. In contrast, 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 (Gantt and Williams, 2021).

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). Unlike ethical hedonism, psychological egoism is not a theory about what ought to be the case in human affairs, nor is it a claim about how we ought to best pursue our own interests. Instead, as Williams (2018) notes, psychological egoism is "a *descriptive* (explanatory) rather than a *prescriptive* (or ethical) theory," and therefore, "this means that [psychological egoism] is about why people are motivated to behave as they do, rather than about how people *should* be motivated" (p. 205). Thus, 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). Furthermore, "universal selfishness is not just an accident or a coincidence on this view; rather, it is an unavoidable consequence of psychological laws" (p. 167).

It is in this light that psychological theories of behavior have so often relied on psychological egoism to account for why people do the things they do, seek the things they seek, think the thoughts they think, and desire the things they desire. However, to be clear here, presuming that all behavior is motivated by self-interest does not mean that all of our behavior is overtly selfish or manifestly self-serving. Indeed, many theorists who endorse psychological egoism readily accept that people commonly act in solicitous, benevolent, and prosocial ways. In essence, the argument is that because helping other people, being courteous to them, and sharing with them are the sorts of things that typically produces in us pleasant feelings or rewarding experiences, it makes perfect sense that people would engage in such acts in order to increase their chances of maximizing their overall individual happiness—or, at least, minimize their chances of experiencing frustration or pain (Maurer, 2013). After all, being nice to other

people can not only make you feel good, doing so also reduces the likelihood that they will do things that will irritate you or obstruct you in the pursuit of your own ends. Accordingly, Feinberg (2007) 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).

Of course, most people do not go through their lives deliberately calculating the cost-benefit ratios and possible personal payoffs of their daily interactions with other people. Indeed, it is typically only in very unusual situations where we engage in such conscious contemplation and economic analysis regarding our relationships with and obligations to others. Indeed, most theorists recognize this to be true, but nonetheless hold to the underlying assumption of psychological egoism in their explanations of motivation and theories of behavior. Thus, it is not uncommon to find those who endorse the philosophical assumption of psychological egoism positing various sorts of *unconscious* processes capable of performing the necessary cost-benefit analyses to ensure that—despite our conscious intentions or immediately experienced reality—the bedrock reason behind any act, especially those that appear benevolent, compassionate, or other-focused (i.e., altruistic)—is the calculative operations of individual self-interest in the relentless pursuit of maximized pleasure. Be that as it may, there is nonetheless widespread disagreement among researchers and theorists as to what exactly these unconscious processes are and exactly how they operate. Some propose, for example, that the unconscious processes of psychological egoism are genetic or otherwise biochemical in nature, while others suggest that some cognitive mechanism or information-processing system is responsible, and yet others locate their source in the deepest recesses of the unconscious or in some hierarchy of needs (see Reeve, 2025). Regardless of the specific differences in the hypothetical constructs invoked, however, all such theories are united in their presumption that it is simply a fact of human nature that, as the Stoic philosopher Cato stated, "it is love of self which supplies the primary impulse to action" (cited in Rogers, 1997, p. 39). 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

Psychological egoism has very long and distinguished history in the Western intellectual tradition, finding expression in the work of Ancient Greek philosophers such as Epicurus and Diogenes, as well as Enlightenment era thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, and Jeremy Bentham (Rogers, 1997). Many contemporary theorists in psychology have also 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, David Williams, and David Buss, each offering their own unique account of human behavior that draws upon the assumption of psychological egoism (see Carruthers, 2024; Gantt et al., 2013; Gantt and Thayne, 2014; Reeve, 2025; Vitz, 1994; Wallach and Wallach, 1983). 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 (Slife, 2000). 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 (see, e.g., Deckers, 2022). 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 (see, e.g., Adams, 2006; Feinberg, 2007; Hills, 2010; Flescher and Worthen, 2007; Post et al., 2002; Rutherford, 2013). 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 two: needs and authenticity. The language of biological, psychological, emotional, sexual, and social needs is ubiquitous in contemporary psychological theory and psychotherapeutic practice (see, e.g., Deckers, 2022; Hatfield et al., 2010; Lockwood and Perris, 2012; Ryan and Deci, 2017). 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) "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 (Yurdakul and Arar, 2023).

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 (see, e.g., Grambal et al., 2017). As one widely cited text maintains, "*emotional pain* is a response to an injury that *prevents or violates the fulfillment of the basic human needs of being loved, safe, and acknowledged*" (Timulak, 2015, p. 2, emphasis in the original). Thus, "joy comes when our fundamental needs are fulfilled, and suffering comes when they are violated or not fulfilled" (Timulak, 2015, p. 2). On such a view, then, "considering what needs are unmet is a crucial part of the therapist's work" (Timulak, 2015, p. 4), as well as exploring with the client viable ways in which to meet those needs or resolve conflicts between competing needs.

Of course, various therapies differ—often widely—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 surface-level differences, a common commitment to the notion that not only are human beings composed of various sorts of needs that drive their behavior—and the frustration of which generates pain, emotional suffering, and psychopathology—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 (see, e.g., Lockwood and Samson, 2020). 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).

Indeed, whether by explicit endorsement or tacit assumption, many therapeutic approaches to addressing relationship problems, given the assumption that "needs constitute the engines of human behavior" (Wubbolding and Robey, 2012, p. 7), have embraced what is essentially a Social Exchange Theory (SET) perspective for understanding interpersonal relations. In brief, SET asserts that:

> individuals will make choices that provide the best possible outcomes for themselves in light of options

> available to them . . . The theory also proposes that self-interest motivates humans and that they make choices that maximize their profits while minimizing their costs. 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. Thus, social exchange theory emphasizes the importance of understanding costs, rewards, and profits in initiating, maintaining, and ending human relationships. (Hamon and Bull, 2016, 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 language of needs and need fulfilment is not the only way in which the philosophical assumption of psychological egoism manifests in contemporary psychology. Closely associated with the concept of needs and need fulfillment is the notion of the authentic self and related concepts such as self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-discovery, and so forth. In essence, the sort of authenticity that we are describing here can be characterized as "reflecting the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise" and "having awareness of, and trust in, one's motives, feelings, desires, and self-relevant cognitions" (Kernis, 2003, p. 13). Additionally, according to Kernis (2003), "authenticity involves knowledge of one's needs, values, feelings, figure-ground personality aspects, and their roles in behavior" (p. 13), the achievement of which constitutes "optimal self-esteem."

In such a view, psychological disorders and emotional suffering are, according to Petersen (2011), "the precise opposite of successful self-realization" (p. 5). Thus, to be an authentic self is to have clearly identified one's central needs and to have released oneself from doubt and fear so as to most fully embrace those needs and experience the joy, psychic integration, and behavioral wholeness such an embrace is thought to provide. It is to place oneself at the center of a psychological, emotional, and moral (even spiritual) drama where the needs of the self and their fulfillment are of primary importance in conducting one's life and understanding oneself. Indeed, as Lindholm (2013) notes, "The call to 'be thyself' is not merely a matter of personal preference, but a moral imperative" (p. 362). Similarly, Curran (2013) observes that the call to authenticity "designates a mode of life in which the inner feelings of the individual are not merely communicated but are the very criterion for assessing the good" (p. 978).

In the end, any therapy whose principle aim is to assist clients in discovering the unmet needs that compel their behavior and feelings so that they might embrace those needs and thereby become an authentic self is necessarily a therapy informed, whether explicitly or implicitly, by the tenets of psychological egoism. The world-view of the authentic self, Wilkens and Sanford (2009) argue, is one that "worships the freedom to express our uniqueness against constraints and conventions" in such a way that "freedom becomes the rationale for reducing any responsibilities perceived as limitations to my personal autonomy or fulfillment, whether those responsibilities are social, moral, religious or family duties" (p. 28). However, as advocates of this view are quick to point out, this view is not to be seen as encouraging a narcissistic obsession with oneself—or, for that matter, with myopic, antisocial, and self-indulgent arrogance (see Henschke and Sedlmeier, 2023). Indeed, as Irvani (2017) argues, "Authentically loving one's self is distinguished from selfishness or narcissism" insofar as authentic self-love "is giving to others while giving to one's self; narcissism is a self-centered, maladaptive, grandiose, and inauthentic preoccupation with one's self" (p. 24). "Self-love becomes good," Clough (2006) writes, "when people who want to be treated decently treat others decently; when people who want security seek the security of others as well; when people want to be

appreciated show appreciation; when people who want to be treated justly act justly; and when people who want to be cared for care for others" (p. 29).

Despite the ethical concern here regarding fairness, justice, and kindness towards others, in the end all such concerns are an outgrowth of a deeper concern for meeting the needs of the individual self, for the possibility of the realization of the self in authenticity. As Henschke and Sedlmeier (2023) note, the quest for authenticity (i.e., self-acceptance and self-love) "focuses first on the individual before shaping relationships with others as part of self-care" (p. 296). One troubling implication of these ideas for psychology is that persons come to be understood as organisms who are fundamentally constituted by their most basic nature such that they are always, and in all ways, inescapably driven to seek after individual gratification by the various needs and drives that define them. While some theoretical formulations do allow for some measure of personal agency (e.g., rational choice theory, humanism, etc.)—at least, insofar as the particular means by which particular needs are fulfilled is left up to individual choice—the possibility of not being driven by self-interest as an interminable quest for individual gratification is denied from the very outset by the taken-for-granted presumption of psychological egoism. In other words, even if some measure of free choice is permitted by the particular theory or therapy in question, it is still always the case that we are never free to be otherwise than fundamentally motivated by self-concern.

In the end, only one motive (i.e., selfishness) is presumed to account for all of our varied thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as the structure and meaning of our relationships with one another. Selfless giving of oneself on behalf of another, investment in the welfare of another person with no thought for reciprocation or return on that investment, is simply not permitted as a genuine possibility in human relationships, no matter how loving, intimate, or committed. Ultimately, the presumption of psychological egoism requires that all relationships be reduced to manipulative attempts to secure for oneself the satisfaction of one's (conscious or unconscious, physical or psychological) own desires. No matter how loving or altruistic a given act of caring and compassion for another might seem, no matter the depth of the sharing and the giving that might be involved, the logically necessary implication of psychological egoism is, and can only be, as Hoffman states, "however much a person cares about others, when the chips are down, the individual thinks of himself first" (Hoffman, 2000, p. 1).

A further implication of assuming psychological egoism is that other people are reduced to being one of only three types of objects. Once the premises of psychological egoism have been granted other people, like all other objects we might encounter in the world, are capable of presenting themselves to us only as (1) opportunities for gratification, (2) sources of possible frustration, or (3) items of indifference who are, as such, unworthy of our regard or concern. In philosophical circles this "propensity to limit our understanding of human activity to the employment of strategies or techniques in pursuit of ends that are independent of those means is called *instrumentalism*" (Fowers, 2010, p. 103). This is a vision of both human thought and behavior that "emphasizes efficiency or effectiveness of means as the predominating picture of rational thinking and action" (Bishop, 2007, p. 82). In other words, all of our behaviors, including and especially our interactions and relationships with others, are best characterized in terms of an overarching means-ends rationality whereby the significance of any behavior or relationship is understood solely in terms of its instrumental value to the individual actor. That is, a given behavior is rational and meaningful only insofar as it serves as an effective means for obtaining some personally desired and personally satisfying outcome.

The ethic of personal authenticity, undergird by the assumption of psychological egoism, "tends to view the world and others largely as aids for or impediments to our projects and self-actualization" (Bishop, 2007, 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—and marriage in particular—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 (Gantt et al., ress).

Upon reflection we can see that this idea was operating in some of the quotations by popular theorists we examined earlier where civility, caring, sharing, and treating others justly were taken to be important means for securing for oneself the benefits of being treated with civility, kindness, solicitude, and justice. In such a perspective, other people are not to be respected and honored or cared for as ends in themselves, but are to be used (however gently and judiciously) as means to obtaining respect, honor, and care for oneself. When human nature is conceived in this way, and human relationships seen through its prism, it becomes all but impossible to qualitatively distinguish a difference between the sort of relationship one might have with a dear friend or spouse or child from that one might have with a candy bar or other consumable object that one might use to satisfy one's desires. The only distinction that is sustainable is a quantitative one wherein other people matter more than candy bars simply because their potential as sources of personal gratification is so much more extensive and varied. Simply put, psychological egoism assumes that we engage in caring, sharing, justice, and love insofar as they provide benefits for ourselves not because others deserve to be treated that way by virtue of their inherent worth.

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 satisfaction in one way or another such that 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 (see, e.g., Impett et al., 2019; Lehmiller, 2024). 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 (Dillon et al., 2011). 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 (see Atkinson, 2023; Bellah et al., 1985; Fowers, 2010; Säfström, 2022; Wilkens and Sanford, 2009). 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 (see Mangone, 2020)—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 must also assume that intentionality in human action matters, deeply and profoundly, in order to preserve all other aspects of moral agency, especially the possibility of acting in many different ways and for many different reasons.

Intentionality, at least as we are speaking of it here, is the idea that human action is always actively directed toward the accomplishment of a purpose important to the person (Gantt and Williams, 2014). As such, it plays the role that "motivation" has traditionally played in explanations of behavior insofar as it provides an encompassing account of the well-spring of human action. In contrast, the concept of motivation, in keeping with its mechanistic Newtonian roots, is a much more passive process, one that is generally employed to explain how objects are moved about without their active, agentic participation, their motions determined by forces that lie outside themselves or beyond their control or awareness. The concept of intentionality, on the other hand, arises from, and thus brings with it into any theory or explanation, the ontological presumption that human beings are by nature, and from the beginning, moral agents enmeshed in a relational world of meanings and possibilities that both shape them and are shaped by them. In this sense, human behavior is not the necessitated product of underlying determinative motivational forces, such as those found in accounts relying on the assumption of psychological egoism, but rather dynamically flow out of the rich and morally significant possibilities engendered in the relational realities of purposive human life.

Furthermore, this view of personhood rejects the notion—intrinsic to any egoistic account of human nature—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, 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 (Gantt and Williams, 2021). 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.

Contrary to the fundamentally atomistic, individualizing implications of psychological egoism, a morally agentic perspective on human nature and relationships is one in which transcendence of self is a very real possibility, and not some unattainable or mystical ideal. From the perspective of moral, relational agency, we can genuinely become "at one" with one another as we take up the moral enticements of our relationships and forgo the allure of selfish desires and manipulative or deceptive purposes to, instead, give ourselves over to the moral and spiritual possibilities of more fully human (and fully divine) relationship with others. Because we are not inescapably bound by self-interested and hedonistic motivations that drive our relationships, we are able to bridge the interpersonal divide that psychological egoism presumes is an intrinsic feature of human life—the divide that separates self-seeking egos from one another in the perpetually manipulative hunt for maximum personal gratification and minimum inconvenience.

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 practitioners. The pervasive assumptions of scientific neutrality, naturalism, determinism, 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 argued, 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.

Moreover, our critique of naturalism, determinism, and psychological egoism reveals that the dominant psychological paradigms tend to reduce

human beings to mechanistic entities governed by impersonal forces, thereby undermining core gospel principles such as moral agency, divine identity, and eternal purpose. Such reductions not only limit the scope of psychological inquiry but also constrain therapeutic practice by excluding transcendent sources of meaning and healing. As we have argued, however, these philosophical commitments are neither empirically neutral nor inevitable; rather, they are contestable assumptions that require deliberate examination. Without careful, sustained, and critical reflection, however, Latter-day Saint psychologists risk becoming "crypto-missionaries," implicitly promoting a worldview that is incompatible with the theological foundations of the Restoration.

By way of an alternative, we have proposed strong theism and embodied moral agency as viable and intellectually defensible perspectives that better align with Latter-day Saint doctrine. A theistic framework affirms the active involvement of a relational God in human affairs, thereby restoring a sense of purpose, meaning, and divine connection to psychological understanding. Similarly, the emphasis on moral agency reorients conceptions of human behavior away from deterministic causality and toward intentional, meaningful action situated within relational and moral contexts. These alternatives not only preserve the integrity of religious belief but also expand the conceptual resources available for therapeutic work, allowing for a more holistic and humanizing approach to psychological inquiry and therapeutic care.

Ultimately, the integration of philosophical and theological reflection is not optional for Latter-day Saint psychologists seeking to remain faithful to their covenant commitments as professionals. Thus, we reject the so-called "two hats" strategy, and instead call for a unified approach in which secular knowledge claims are critically examined through the lens of revealed truth, prophetic counsel, and sophisticated conceptual analysis. Such an approach will foster, we believe, greater self-awareness, intellectual integrity, and ethical responsibility, thereby enabling researchers and therapists to more effectively serve their clients while remaining grounded in the doctrines of the Restoration. In this way, the careful "unmingling" of the philosophies of men and scripture becomes not only a doctrinal imperative but also a practical guide for faithful and meaningful psychological practice.

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