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Embodied Moral Agency as Foundation: Human Sexuality as a Test Case

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Abstract

This paper develops a view of human sexuality in the context of an understanding that human beings are, by virtue of their ontology itself (i.e., their essential being), agentic in a radical and comprehensive way. Human agency, as developed in this essay, manifests in its most fundamental expression as the constant "taking up" of ideas, meanings, feelings, and possibilities, and concomitantly, in the constant "giving of self over to" those same ideas, meanings, feeling, and possibilities to a non-negligible degree. Thus, "taking up," and "giving ourselves over" constitute both the substance of human agentic action, and also the origins, reasons, and justifications that are essential characteristics of any real agentic action. The paper applies this new understanding in the context of human sexuality. In contemporary social science explanations and theories of sexuality there is no form of explanation more common than that which invokes invisible abstractions presumed to exert real causal power over human actions, thoughts, feelings, and meanings. This paper offers an alternative understanding of human sexuality as inherently agentic, thus freeing it from the presumed causal efficacy of powerful, invisible abstractions and thereby preserving its humanity by insuring the possibility of always doing and of being otherwise.

***Keywords*:** moral agency, embodiment, sexuality, abstractionism, intentionality

Human sexuality, as a universal and widely studied phenomenon, seems to hold a special status among human phenomena, in that it is widely held to be basically biologically determined (LeVay et al., 2019). However, at the same time, it is also widely held to be one of the most important and meaningful of all activities in which human beings seem purposefully to engage — that is, it seems to be an importantly agentic matter (Albanesi, 2010). In short, paradoxically, a great many people defend the legitimacy of radical individual freedom of action in sexual matters while also considering sexuality to be fundamentally biologically based, or otherwise

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driven by abstract causal forces. Indeed, Wilkerson (2009) notes that the "standard view" in contemporary society and social science is that sexual orientation is "an enduring, fairly stable desire oriented toward a particular gender" that is "thought to be a constant and underlying feature of a person's make up," while sexual identity is "a self-consciously direct project that a person develops around this orientation" (p. 97). However, Wilkerson (2009) also notes that this distinction often disappears in many of our discussions about sexuality because "such talk often runs orientation and identity together" (p. 98).

The obvious contradiction between determinism and agentic origins speaks to both the importance attached to sexuality in our culture and to a persistent and enduring, possibly even self-deceived, confusion about its nature and meaning. And, insofar as the social sciences contribute significantly to the larger culture's understanding of human sexuality, the contradiction we note also attests to a fundamental incoherence in contemporary social science accounts of sexuality (see Eberstadt, 2019; Grant, 2015; Soh, 2020; Trueman, 2020). This paper will present an analysis of both abstract-nature and agentic approaches to understanding sexuality in the hope of shedding some new light on the phenomena, as well as bringing some clarity (by way of contrast) to the oft-muddled accounts present in contemporary psychological theory and practice relevant to sexual matters. We note at the outset that this task is complicated significantly because the language of sexuality — scholarly as well as common conversational language — is constantly shifting as people insist on certain definitions and usages to support their particular theories or political agendas, and, thereby, "capture the discourse" on sexuality for themselves (see Kuby, 2015). We will try to note these language problems along the way, and try not to let them derail the analysis.

Sexuality as Abstraction

Simply stated, the following analysis aims to establish that human sexuality is best understood as embodied agentic action. As such, human sexuality is neither reducible to underlying biological or natural causes, nor to the effects of powerful invisible abstractions — either of which would turn sexuality into a type of natural event rather than a meaningful human action. However, our claim here does not entail the somewhat common but conceptually flawed claim that sexuality, as genuinely human agentic action, is a matter of sexual behaviors, desires, orientations, or identities being freely chosen from among alternatives by an independent (free) rational will. This is to say, in order to support our claim that sexuality is agentic, human agency itself must be understood in a different (dare we say better) way, one that does not simply reflect a view of agency as "radical choice" (Taylor, 1985), or what is often termed "libertarian free will" (Clarke, 2003). Thus, a major purpose of this essay is to offer a new account of human agency, an account that can make sense of agentic human sexuality without succumbing to the temptations of either reductionism or radical free choice.

One major conclusion of our analysis is that the term "sexuality" does not really designate or refer to any "real" thing, category, or object. "Sexuality" is an abstraction, a general idea about context and meaning of all sorts of thoughts, observations, and experiences related to sex. And ideas — as thoughts, observations, and experiences — have their being only in the acts of thinking, observing, and experiencing. Such acts are real, but they produce ideas, and a generalized idea is an abstraction, not a category of real things. Thus, we contend, the term "sexuality" has, in fact, no real referent, no condition or entity, no "thing" to which the word directly or adequately corresponds. Rather, as we will show, "sexuality" is more fruitfully understood as a description of what people do, say, or think, and not as the name of something people possess, or something that is operating within people or upon people and causing them to do what they do, or to desire how and what they desire. This view stands in stark contrast to the prevailing consensus in the professional and academic areas of contemporary social science, as well as in the larger social and moral context of modern Western self-understanding (see Eberstadt, 2019; Lehmiller, 2018; Trueman, 2020).

Indeed, the current intellectual fashion is to offer explanation and understanding of virtually all human actions, including "sexual" activity, in

terms of the operations of powerful abstractions, invisible to the eye, and discernable by only those whose minds have been educated to "see" and understand the operations of such invisible forces, as well as to understand themselves and others in those terms (Toomela, 2008; Williams, 2018; Williams et al., 2021). For example, as Lehmiller (2018) asserts in a popular introductory text on the psychology of human sexuality, "As a starting point, it is useful to acknowledge that every single sexual act is the result of several powerful forces acting upon one or more persons" (p. 3). And, he continues, "Whether sex occurs at any given moment depends on which forces are strongest at the time" (p. 3). It is the appointed task of the educated and critically discerning social science researcher or practitioner to detect and identify these powerful (though subtle and abstract) causal forces — the operations of which the individual him- or herself is almost certainly unaware — in order to fully comprehend and explain the variety of human sexual desires, acts, and relationships that make up what we refer to as "sexuality."[1]

Perhaps the best known of all such abstractions applied to the understand-ing or explanation of sexuality are those drawn from the psychoanalytical theory of Sigmund Freud. Such abstractions include the "unconscious mind," "libido," "id, "ego," "superego," and, indeed, the whole notion of "sexual drives" (see, e.g., Freud, 1949, 1961, 1962). Without recounting the intellectual history in detail, we will simply note that this sort of explanatory tack — i.e., a reliance on abstractions to do the conceptual heavy lifting of explanation and understanding — is one inherited mostly from the European philosophy of the late 17th and early to mid-20th centuries. Its line of descent can be traced from the Enlightenment materialism and mechanism of figures such as Thomas Hobbes (Gantt and Williams, 2021) and Isaac Newton (Gantt and Williams, 2014), the Romanticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Trueman, 2020), the positivistic science of August Comte (Singer, 2005), and the "absolute idealism" of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, especially as manifest in more recent times in Marxism, Cultural Marxism, and Critical Theories of all stripes (Hayek, 1952). One of the most influential uses of abstractions to explain sexuality and sexual behavior originated in the "Third Force" psychology that developed in the middle decades of the 20th century, with its heavy reliance on concepts such as "needs," the "authentic self," and "orientations" (Gantt and Thayne, 2017). More contemporary treatments of human sexuality tend to draw at will from the full gamut of explanatory modes currently offered within the human sciences: positivism, structuralism, behaviorism, humanism, evolutionary approaches, neurophysiology, social psychological and post-modern social constructivist and critical theories (see, e.g., DeLamater and Plante, 2015; Naples, 2020) all of which rely heavily on the explanatory power of reified abstractions, and do so uncritically.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong, in principle, with using an abstract term like "sexuality" in common conversation. Effective communication in general would be very difficult without the use of such abstractions. One could use that word in any number of casual conversations, and everyone would know what was being talked about. However, "sexuality" becomes more than merely a conversational descriptive term when it is applied as the name of a metaphysical category of "things," or set of supposedly real things, or real types of persons, or forces that "push" and "pull" persons to do or feel certain things, whether from the inside, the outside, or some combination of the two. When used in such a way, "sexuality" begins to take on an existence of its own that is independent of conversational or descriptive narratives about agentic human actions, be-

[1] One is reminded of Stanley Milgram's famous description of the nature of social psychological inquiry into human action, a description that can be justifiably applied to most contemporary social scientific research and theory. Milgram wrote: "The implicit model for experimental work is that of the person influenced by social forces while often believing in his or her own independence of them. It is thus a social psychology of the reactive individual, the recipient of forces and pressures emanating from outside oneself. The social world does not impinge on us as a set of discrete variables, but as a vibrant, continuous stream of events whose constituent parts can be dissected only through analysis, and whose effects can be most compellingly demonstrated through the logic of experiments. Indeed, the creative claim of social psychology lies in its capacity to reconstruct varied types of social experience in an experimental format, to clarify and make visible the operation of obscure social forces so that they may be explored in terms of the language of cause and effect" (Milgram, 1992, p. xix).

coming instead a label for types of actions, or, as the lines of analysis proceed, a name for a real cause of those actions. This sort of reification can be seen in the context of "sexuality," in references to such things and categories as "homo-sexuality," "hetero-sexuality," "bi-sexuality," or "pan-sexuality." In other words, such terms have ceased being mere descriptors of certain sexual acts a person engages in, and instead have become the explanation or reason why the person engages in those acts. Additionally, once this initial reification of sexuality has occurred, other abstractions are often and quickly drawn into the explanatory vocabulary to name more presumably real things and causes that are part of "sexuality," for example, "sexual needs," "sexual orientation," "sexual drives," "sexual identity," and so on. In conversations informed by contemporary thought in the social sciences, "sexuality" is almost always, and usually without reservation, transformed from being simply a useful abstraction for describing a broad category of human actions into a name for real things, either types of persons, or some invisible abstract things with causal efficacy in sexually relevant human actions.[2]

The crucial question about this sort of rhetorical and theoretical drift — wherein descriptions of actions are turned into real things, rather than remaining mere descriptions of actions (i.e., becoming nouns instead of adjectives) — is whether a category mistake has been made. In other words, by what new discovery or influx of knowledge do these reified descriptors ("sexuality," "orientation," etc.) show us that they are more than simply innocent descriptions of what persons do, but are in fact really the names of actual categories to which persons are to be assigned, or names of real, powerful, invisible causes of what people do relative to sex, and how and why they do it. In short, the question is, have we mistaken the abstract force for the human intentional act, and vice versa? Our answer, as you will see, is a resounding "yes!"

Of Agency and Abstraction

One of the salient effects of the reification of abstractions is the loss of genuine human agency from our understandings and explanations of our humanity and our actions. The absence of any compelling sense or understanding of agency in human affairs results in the loss of meaning, purpose, and the possibility of genuine proactive, self-initiated change (see Williams and Gantt, 2020, 2021). This, in turn, profoundly affects our understanding and explanation of sexual activity of all sorts (e.g., behavioral, cognitive, emotive, moral). With this in mind, then, this essay will focus first on how reifying abstractions obviates genuine human agency and how our current understanding of human agency is inadequate as an explanation of human agency as it is actually lived and experienced. We will explore some consequences of this inadequate thinking — both about agency and about sexuality — for our understanding of our humanity. We will move then to introduce an alternative understanding of human agency that overcomes the current problems and discuss the benefits of our alternative view of sexuality as agentic acts.

Our experience suggests that in the technical language of the social sciences and clinical practice, and even in the language of everyday life, reified abstractions have largely captured the imagination of a great many people, and, thus, the general discourse about human sexuality is suffused with reified abstractions. One result of this is that people actually do think of themselves — including when it comes to thinking about sex, sexual behavior, and gender — as being caused or determined (or at least heavily pressed upon) by any number of causes and forces that are outside their control, or certainly not readily subject to their agency (see Hess et al., 2014). These occult, abstract causes are given great deference in conversations, both professional and casual. It seems odd to have such confidence in, and give such deference to, the supposed importance and power of abstract things when the only evidence of their existence (i.e., that they have legitimate ontological status) — indeed the only form in which they can confidently be said to exist — is that they have

[2]For a fuller analysis of how this tendency toward reification in psychology reflects a "metaphysic of things," as well as a discussion of the philosophical issues and consequences involved, see Williams (1992).

been thought of. If we were to assign a real ontological status to them, it must surely only be that they exist as thoughts produced and expressed by human beings. And, very importantly, the only way they can continue to exist is by continuing to be thought. Even if one were to object to this conclusion by suggesting that things like "identities" or "orientations" can also be felt; that is, they can be experienced as "feelings," as subjective emotional states — feelings are always feelings about something, or toward something — otherwise they are merely bodily, diffuse, inarticulate, and of no effect above the level of general perturbance. Thus, the only way a feeling can have an effect on a person is for it to find expression, ultimately, as a thought, an idea.[3] As we will argue below, this very ontology (i.e., as idea) confirms that these supposed abstract causes, as thoughts and ideas, are in reality, themselves, meaningful agentic acts. This is the conclusion to which the following analysis takes us.

What this means is that we have come to think of ourselves largely as "having" an identity, including a sexual identity, instead of just being the person that our embodiment, our history, our kinship, and our experience belong to. Claiming to have an "identity" is redundant, and provides no new understanding or insight, it simply renames, as an abstract "thing," what is already the totality of our experience and agentic living. Such an abstract, reified "identity" seems from this reifying perspective to be in some way responsible for things about us which we must either accept, or which we must try (sometimes with some desperation) to control. Doing so, however, results in a highly unnatural split of our personhood such that we become both an "identity" and a "person" apart from that identity, someone who must either fulfill or oppose that identity for reasons about which the two parts might strongly disagree. This situation is as odd as it is difficult, and one that for an LDS Christian surely makes no sense. For what purpose would a loving Father and God create us and place us in a situation as part of an opportunity for moral development, but do so in a condition in which we have a fundamental split in our being such that war within ourselves is basically inevitable, and being true to our eternal nature is, by design, ambiguous and fraught with contradiction?[4] The reasonable response to this question would be, of course, that a truly loving God would not do such things. Indeed, we have some scriptural assurance on the matter. For example, we read in the Epistle of James: "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed" (James 1:13-14). If we take the liberty of defining "his own lust" as "his own agentic thoughts and ideas," the essence of our agentic analysis becomes clearer.

That a loving Heavenly Father does create or arrange such conflicts for us is, we suggest, a misconception rooted in the secular discourse about ourselves and about sexuality that we described above, and is not rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ or the plan of salvation. The more reasonable answer, we believe, is that as human beings we do not "have" any such thing as an "identity," certainly not one that stands apart from ourselves as we live, think, believe, and become, and, thus, our identity is largely of our own making, not hovering somewhere waiting to be discovered, realized, or obeyed. Rather, it is a description of what we do, think, and feel, rather than an occult and independent abstract causal force or entity somehow working within us or outside us from somewhere or other. We can find no scriptural reference to any "designer conflicts" or "designer weaknesses" crafted by our Father in Heaven that He might somehow have implanted in us (perhaps within an identity). In fact, there is scriptural evidence to the contrary. In Ether 12:27, for example, we find:

> And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for

[3] Though we will not develop the analysis here, this approach to understanding emphasizes the fact that human thoughts, feelings, and actions are radically holistic; every feeling is about something (accurately or not) and thus is intimately connected to a thought, and actions have thoughts and feelings already inherent in them.

[4] And lest one wants to simply claim that this odd situation merely arises because of naïve religiosity, we might ask of the non-believer what interest Nature could have in creating such a conflict of identities, why "evolutionary wisdom" would dictate such a struggle, or how and why "reproductive advantage" would accrue from it?

> all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.

It is important to note here that both uses of the term "weakness" in this passage are in the singular, which may indicate two things important to the point we are making here. First, it does not seem to be the case that the Lord handcrafts for each of us a set of weakness-es or temptations (plural), but rather that mortality — a state of weakness itself — provides an adequate opportunity for all moral agents to accomplish their purpose, and has been and will be overcome by Jesus Christ unto redemption. And second, as noted above, God is the source of redemption, not the source of the problem. Indeed, it is not clear exactly how God might actually become the source of a weakness in anyone's character. In order to do so, it would seem that God would have to first create an identity, or an orientation, a drive, or a particular "weakness" or set of "weaknesses" since these things seem to be made of ideas, such as experiences, memories, interests, habits, decisions, and emotive responses all of which are the products of our individual living and acting and reacting to the world we live in. How could God fashion something like an "identity," or an "orientation," and in what form could he "store" it, or where could he store it, while waiting for the right time to "give" it to someone or allow them to discover it? And because such things are very complex and context rich, "giving" such an abstraction would surely involve something more than whispering in an ear or triggering a thought in the mind. The whole process seems to be fraught with severe conceptual difficulties sufficient to suggest that it just cannot be the case. This position seems to make a loving Father and God simultaneously the designer of what might damn us, and the source of what might save us. Despite the fact that it might possess some mystical attraction that appeals to some with a taste for the absolutely numinous, the position fails as Latter-day Saint Christian doctrine.

Once again, scripture offers a clearer way of understanding how God "gives" us moral agency. As Alma the Younger taught:

> Wherefore, he gave commandments unto men, they having . . . [become] as gods, knowing good from evil, placing themselves in a state to act, or being placed in a state to act according to their wills and pleasures, whether to do evil or to do good. (Alma 12:31)

Carefully reading this passage teaches us that God "gives" us agency by simply telling us what is true or good and putting us in a state to act according to our wills. This notion is further reinforced in Latter-day scripture where we learn of another sense in which God "gives" us agency:

> Behold, I gave unto him that he should be an agent unto himself; and I gave unto him commandment, but . . . my commandments are spiritual; they are not natural nor temporal, neither carnal nor sensual. (Doctrine and Covenants 29:35)

In other words, one meaning of God's "giving" us something spiritually relevant is his "allowing" us to act agentically. So, on the one hand, it seems that He does not "give" us agency in the sense that we are missing some "thing" and He gives it to us — which makes sense since our agency consists of our being the kind of beings who constantly act and create, morally, conceptually, physically, and spiritually. But he does allow us to live agentically. By the same token, then, identities, orientations, propensities, attractions, tendencies, and lusts are not the sorts of things God "gives" us, as particular weaknesses to be overcome by the exertion of individual will. Indeed, such things do not seem to be the kind of things even God could give us. Rather, they are the sorts of things that we as agents readily do (i.e., create for ourselves, as God allows us to live out our lives agentically). And, in terms of our wrestle with identities, orientations, attractions, and such, it is our fundamental human agency that is both the way in and the way out — with God's help.

In summary, then, our larger (psychologically-informed) secular culture inclines us to think we are subject to powerful abstractions such as sexual drives, desires, attractions, identities, and orientations that have to be dealt with, controlled, ac-

cepted, or embraced and indulged, or even celebrated. This understanding is often so pervasive and unquestioned that it may not even occur to us that such things in fact do not exist — except as invented descriptions of what we, as individual human agents, actively think, feel, and do. The category mistake we mentioned above is that we put all of these sexual things in a category of "real things" exercising some power over us, when they are in truth just terms that describe how we are actively engaging as human agents in the world of which sexually relevant thoughts, actions, and feelings are a part. In a word, all these things are really descriptions of stuff we do; they are not things that do stuff to us. This is the fundamental claim of this essay.

Change and Fluidity

One objection to the entire line of analysis developed in the previous section might be that it is irrelevant because, according to a competing analysis, those just-named abstractions taken to be definitive of sexuality are not really firm categories because sexuality itself is "fluid." However, suggesting that sexuality is "fluid" opens some insightful possibilities viz-a-viz our main proposition that sexuality — when understood properly — might really be, in some important ways, agentic (Diamond, 2008). However, it must be kept in mind that fluidity in the context of sexuality can be conceived of in at least two ways. First, some might contend that sexuality is fluid in that people can move from one ontologically real category to another, essentially being one kind of sexual being, and then becoming another kind of sexual being (Hoffman-Fox, 2017). In terms of abstract sexual things, such as identities, orientations, drives, and so forth, this is a difficult proposition because there is no developed sense of how abstract laws, principles, concepts, structures, variables and such things can actually morph to become different abstractions. By their very nature, and in keeping with the role they play in social scientific explanations, abstractions are generally taken to be stable and unambiguous, and, thus, not subject to change or even extinction. This presumed stability and lack of ambiguity are what undergird the usefulness of abstractions as (presumed) scientific explanations. In the case of abstractions related to sexuality, such as identity, orientation, preference, attractions, and any number of others, research has not been able to provide stable, consensual, validated measures or definitions that can bring respect and scientific validity to the psychological study of human sexuality (see Sell, 1997, 2007; Wolff et al., 2017).

Second, this proposition of fluidity is difficult to defend if sexuality is held to be exclusively or entirely biologically based. The difficulty stems from the fact that there seem to be very few, if any, physical organisms that can be first one thing and then another. Even in the interesting case of insect metamorphosis where a butterfly emerges from a chrysalis as a butterfly after having emerged from the egg as a caterpillar, it is possible to trace a single organism through each of the various stages of development. At no point does the organism become a different organism. If insects had identities, the organism's identity would not change; if we had named the caterpillar "John," for example, then we could still be sure that the butterfly it became is still also John. Only the form John took has changed — which is what is implied in the term morph in "metamorphosis;" it is a changing of shape. There is, however, nothing in human life that even approaches metamorphosis, and when we consider that human beings are also possessed of consciousness, self-reflection, evaluative powers, memory, and historicity, it becomes obvious that our selfhood, our very ipseity,[5] is not ontologically fluid. Conscious self-awareness, coupled with meaningful historicity, makes it virtually impossible — barring some major physiological injury or other aberration — that we could ever meaningfully claim that who and what we ontologically are is fluid in any substantive ontological way.[6]

There is, however, a sense of "fluidity" that

[5]Essential selfhood or "self-ness," the quality of being what one is as distinct from anyone or anything else.

[6]If we could actually become someone or something else, our salvation history would be very difficult to define or understand. Whom did the Father send here to undergo a moral test? Who actually underwent that test? And, if one were to actually receive salvation, what would happen if one was to "morph" again? In such a world, what possible meaning could "repentance" even have? Thinking of human beings in such a way severely threatens the possibility of eternal relationships for the very same reasons.

coincides with a genuinely agentic understanding of our humanity. Indeed, it makes sense to claim that as agentic beings, what we do (including how we act, how we think, and how we feel and, importantly, why we do so) is in an important way fluid. This is, indeed, a basic thrust of the meaning of agentic sexuality. As we argued above, it is problematic to propose that a human being can really "be" one sort of being, one sort of person, materially and spiritually, and then really become another. Ipseity and its accoutrements are much too durable for this sort of morphing to be possible. But, nonetheless, migration among metaphorical or psychic categories — or ways of being — presents no such conceptual problems because psychic change and fluidity are hallmarks of human rational consciousness and imagination, and, as such, are hallmarks also of human agency. Migration between ontological categories, on the other hand, is unprecedented and, as some scholars have suggested, impossible to even conceptualize.[7]

Laying aside the question of how many scholars are actually careful in making the distinction between "sexuality" as a fairly straightforward descriptive term applied to a certain class of human activities and "sexuality" as a categorical term that designates some actual existent thing with ontological status of some sort, we are still faced with the question of exactly what it is that might be fluid and changing when we speak of "fluid sexuality." For reasons just discussed, it is difficult to defend a claim that "sexuality" is both metaphysically/ontologically real (i.e., an abstraction with causal efficacy) and profoundly fluid in some way. The alternative is to hold that persons and their intentional, meaningful, agentic acts are real, and that they therefore engage in "sexuality" volitionally in various ways with various persons for various reasons in various situations. This is the sort of fluidity that is reasonable.

If one prefers a reifying explanation reliant upon the invocation of abstractions, then "sexuality" really is a "thing" with causal power and causal efficacy (although one's preference does not make it so). Such a view keeps sexuality safely confined to the natural world (including both powerful invisible abstractions and physical matter) where moral quality or value cannot really be attached to it (except in a purely pragmatic sense) — since "natural" phenomena "just are," and thus are morally inert. As Trueman (2020) observes:

> Sexual activity [in this naturalistic sense] is not, in and of itself, moral or immoral. It is just an activity. To the modern post-Freud, post-Nietzsche mind, those who argue that sex acts have intrinsic moral content are merely expressing irrational aesthetic preferences rooted in cultural conditioning of simple prejudice. Sex becomes morally significant only as it is an expression of the self or of personal identity, and so any moral discussion of sex acts or their consequences must be set against that background (pp. 348–349).[8]

In contrast, if sexuality is understood agentically — that is, as what we do, as moral agents, together with others — then sexuality, including imagining, feeling, desiring, and many other ways of being in which people "take up" and "give themselves over to" various real possibilities, is inherently morally relevant and meaningful — chiefly because people are relevant and meaningful (Williams et al., 2021). Meaningfulness, as a key defining attribute of humanity, and our spiritual heritage, is both the content of and context for the fluidity of sexuality, as it is for all human acting. This understanding of sexuality locates it meaningfully within the realm of our humanity to which morality can be legitimately attached — as it can be to all agentic acts (Williams and Gantt, 2021).

[7] See, for example, Nagel (1974) "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" for a compelling analysis of the incoherence of the thesis that human beings might actually achieve change in their metaphysical nature or their fundamental identity, or even authentically imagine such a change.

[8] Trueman (2020) provides further clarification of this point in an accompanying footnote where he points out that "in this framework rape is wrong because it does not include the mutual consent of the parties involved and, therefore, represents the denial of the identity of the victim. The physical act itself, considered from a purely physical perspective, has no moral content, good or bad" (Trueman, 2020, p. 349).

The traditionally presumed advantage of metaphysical reification in understanding and explaining sexuality is that it keeps human sexuality safely within the amoral universe of naturally caused activities, and, thereby, preserves not only the positivist intellectual project of establishing an objective, value-neutral account of behavior, but also any number of compatible structuralist intellectual projects (Howell, 2013). The agentic explanation, on the other hand, brings sexuality (as fundamentally agentic activity) into the realm of "intentionality" as understood in the older, more formal phenomenological sense of that term articulated by such thinkers as Brentano (1995) and Husserl (1982). Intentionality, in this sense, refers to the fact all meaningful human consciousness, and therefore all human action, is intrinsically bound up with a telos, something toward which it tends or aims. Indeed, "the word 'intentionality' derives from the Latin verb intend, meaning to aim or point at, or to extend or stretch" (Carman, 2020, p. 33). Thus, intentionality allows for "moral" significance (in the broadest sense of that term). Genuinely human acts (including sexual acts), as intentional acts, are thus, a matter of what agents do with reason and purpose, in the context of, and for the sake of, a meaningful lifeworld of social relationships and moral possibilities. In contrast, the scientistic, positivist approach to explanation preferred by most in contemporary social science, an approach that posits the existence and causal power of hypothesized abstractions, is one that ultimately strips all human acts and desires, sexual or otherwise, of any intrinsic meaning or moral substance — except insofar as the individual musters up some personal significance and manages to attach it for themselves to maintain some semblance of moral weight in a world of their own making, a world necessarily untethered to any outside, anchoring truth (see Gantt and Williams, 2016, williams2015introduction, williams2018hayek).

Embodiment as a Rescue from Abstractions

The phenomenon of embodiment has a rich history within the phenomenological and hermeneutical philosophical traditions, owing substantially to the influential work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1989, 2004). Succinctly stated, Merleau-Ponty's work contributes a thoughtful and nuanced understanding of the nature and role of the body in the purposive, meaning-making activities of human beings as they live their individual lives. Indeed, as philosopher Charles Taylor noted: "If one had to sum up Merleau-Ponty's philosophical legacy in a phrase, one might say that he more than any other taught us what it means to understand ourselves as embodied agents" (Taylor, 1989, p. 1). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's core thesis, Taylor (1989) states, is that "the human subject is an agent, engaged in activity, and engaged in a world. He is an embodied subject" (p. 1). As Merleau-Ponty (1989) demonstrates in his most famous philosophical work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, the body is the basic medium through which we are in the world. The body, he shows, constitutes a fundamental "existential condition" and "intersubjective ground" for all human experience, action, thought, emotion, and relationship (rather than a bundle of forces, pushes, and pulls). As one of Merleau-Ponty's foremost commentators, Gary Madison (1981) succinctly explains:

> I am a subject only by means of the many unbreakable bonds which tie my consciousness and my body together; I am an embodied subject only by being in a direct mutual relation with the world; and I am in the world only through my co-existence with others who, themselves, are also so many beings in the world. Inversely, the other exists for me only because I am directly linked to the world by a body which is inseparable from my existence. (p. 22)

In other words, as embodied beings, we are always already situated beings, simultaneously enmeshed in social, physical, temporal, and spatial fields of various relationships and meanings. However, just as human action is recognized as always occurring in the context of an inescapable and ever-present biological reality, embodiment is also not in any meaningful way separable from the social, moral, cultural, and historical contexts in which all our acts are inherently embedded. The "lived-body" is a fundamental dimension of our

existence as the sorts of (human) beings we are, the presuppositional horizon within which we live and act. Embodiment is, in this way, the grounding feature of the world of agents and, thus, the most salient context within which agents exercise their creative freedom to be and to do. This view stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing, but philosophically naive perspectives currently on offer from any of a large number of biological-reductive perspectives (see, e.g., Garson, 2015; Plaisance and Reydon, 2012; Plomin, 2019; Rowland, 2020).

A perspective grounded in embodiment suggests that the body is more than a mechanical object, governed by natural forces, defined by abstract conditions or casual tendencies, and driven by reflexive responses. In contrast to the traditional view of the body as mechanical, viewing human agency through the lens of embodiment allows us to see the "lived-body" (i.e., the whole, embodied being) as both site and source of our intentional engagement with, and engagement by, the world in all of our projects: a necessary ground for purposive, meaningful action and relationship.[9] While it is in and through the body that we are able to be intimately familiar with and engage the world and others — and are capable of desiring and acting at all — this does not mean that it is because of the body that we have a world in the first place, nor is it the case that the body is the sole origin or organ of our desires, our actions, or identities. As Merleau-Ponty (2004) notes, "Except in certain contexts, we experience living human bodies, our own and those of other people, not as bits of machinery, but as the expression of a human person and his or her mode of being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 194). Indeed, according to this view, sexuality is not best thought of as some sort of abstract causal force or condition, a category of something that we possess or to which we belong, but rather an active, purposive, meaningfully unfolding mode of our being in the world with others. In other words, the body is best understood as a mode of being, not the material source of being. As such, it should be thought of as affordance — that is, an enabling context rather than as a cause.

In this way, Merleau-Ponty (and others) provides a thoughtful and sophisticated alternative to the reductive and emergent explanatory strategies advanced over the last century or so, all of which attribute direct causal roles to the material body in the production and understanding of meaningful human phenomena, including sexuality (see, e.g., Heinämaa, 2014; Moya and Larrain, 2016; Tolman et al., 2014). Understanding human beings as embodied agents, thus, provides a way of taking both the body and agency seriously — as certainly we must do if we hope to understand human sexuality — while avoiding the pitfalls of naïve and incoherent attempts to get meaning out of meat. It also serves as a deterrent to making all sorts of facile category mistakes of various sorts — such as the common notion that sexual attraction and feelings of love are really just the result of oxytocin and dopamine activity in the limbic system (Schneiderman et al., 2012).

We want next to briefly explicate the value and role of the concept of embodiment (and of embodiment itself) to the question of sexuality and human agency, as well as intrinsically related issues such as sexual identity, sexual orientation, sexual desire, and sexual intimacy, by considering the various challenges entailed in uncritical thinking about such things. Consider the following points specifically.

It is embodiment that provides the first and most immediate (literally "un-mediated")[10] experience of otherness. And, as such, it constitutes an irrefutable validation of ipseity — i.e., of one's individual existence distinct from any others (e.g., we do not share protoplasm or pain receptors with other people). Embodiment stands in contrast to all the other things about us that we can create by

[9]This understanding of embodiment should not be taken as a suggestion that bodies are composed of some sort of magical "smart meat," such that the physical body just has all the intelligence of a person. Such a position leads to all the conceptual problems encountered by invoking magical abstractions and attributing to them causal power — a position we have just refuted. Rather, embodiment simply holds that even if there is an intelligent soul or mind that continues after the death of the body, to understand human beings we must adopt a holistic view that every intelligent agent we meet lives in and through a physical body. This point calls to mind an important point of LDS doctrine shared by most Christians: "And the spirit and the body are the soul of man" (D&C 88:15).

[10]That is to say, embodiment is not produced by or dependent upon conscious deliberating thought or reflection.

an act of our own minds or the exercise of rational capacity, and, because they are just our own ideas, we can readily share them with others.

Like everything else in the stubborn material world, embodiment resists. Embodiment puts boundaries around our creative will and the pride that comes with absolute mastery of anything in the world. It is due to the givenness of embodiment that we are not, alas, as the Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola (1956) suggests in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, the makers and molders of our Selves, able to fashion ourselves into any form we please, the center of heaven and earth, the measure of all things (della Mirandola, 1956, see pp. 7–8). Even though we are agentic beings capable of acting on and in the world in which we find ourselves, the brute facticity of embodiment entails that we are also constrained — often in quite profound and far-reaching ways — in what we can do (e.g., some things are too high, too heavy, or too far away). As embodied agents we live in a world that constrains our agency in important ways, a world that makes relentless demands on us and limits the boundless exercise and expression of our will (e.g., we simply must eat, rest, and depend on things outside us). However, in so doing it is not agency that is constrained, but rather the possibilities and consequences of its expression.

Embodiment is a source of alienation because of the otherness inherent in it. After all, we always just know that the headache we are experiencing is our headache and not someone else's headache. However, it is also a source of intimacy as embodiment allows us to find others, who, at the most basic sense of being to which we have access, are like us and can be with us and we with them. We do not just think sympathy. Indeed, sympathy is not solely or even primarily a matter of cognitively imagining ourselves in another's place, but rather something that can be expressed through touch, though a look, a tone, by lifting up the "hands which hang down" (Heb. 12:12), and so forth. Embodiment marks us off as different from one another in deep and impermeable ways even as it opens up for us a shared world of possibilities and meanings. The otherness of embodied persons is different from the otherness of material things. The concreteness afforded us in embodiment is a surer foundation for finding, engaging, and knowing others than any sort of imaginative empathic thought could ever afford us. In fact, as the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1969) argues, it is the encounter with concrete otherness that calls us into being as ourselves, as who we are as the particular beings we are. In short, he argues that we would have no reason or occasion to be "us" if it were not for our intimate awareness of "them" and the moral obligation which concrete otherness affords us. Embodiment makes this otherness of the other real and salient, and calls us out in a way ideas never could. It is, thus, perhaps no surprise that Levinas describes the encounter with the other, the encounter that instantiates the self as a self, as the experience of "the face-to-face" (Levinas, 1985, see especially, pp. 83–92).

It is the embodied other, and the context of both the limitations and possibilities that embodiment brings, that provide the occasion for the possibility of morality and meaning. Embodiment makes salient the consequences of our actions not only in our own lives, but in the lives of others. Without others and the constraints incumbent in an embodied world there would be no salient context for caring and sharing. Neither material things nor abstract ideas can really cooperate with us in joint meaningful projects. Even using a tool from the natural world is not really a joint or shared endeavor — the world from which the tool comes does not care about any project. Real caring and sharing involves joint projects, engaging both mind and body with an embodied other. It is the embodied presence that makes a loved one all the more dear, and the bodily absence that makes the loss of a loved one all the more poignant.

Embodiment is particularly important in experiencing and understanding sexuality not only because sexuality generally involves the body and bodily affordances, but, more importantly, because sex is instantiated in the physical body. For males, in addition to primary and secondary sex characteristics, every cell in the body (except blood cells) is also male. For females, in addition to primary and secondary sex characteristics, every cell in the body (except for blood cells) is female. This biological fact seems to be immutable. In discussions of sexual fluidity, then, biological sex is not one of the factors that is mu-

table. A significant part of the muddle in both academic and lay discussions of human sexuality arises from making fine, mostly rhetorical, distinctions between "sex" and "gender," and the introduction into discussions of various terms referring to various "things" with very different ontological provenances (see Kuby, 2015, especially pp. 108–120). This serves to keep the conversations fluid and allows for any number of claims that might make conversational or grammatical sense, but which are logically and/or ontologically incoherent (see Trueman, 2020). One might state, for example, that "gender" is fluid, and in so doing cite differences in gender roles and gender identities, and then also propose that sex is a part of gender, so that sex is similarly fluid — in spite of what the biological facts "on the ground," so to speak, happen to be. In these types of discussions, careful definitions, conceptual consistency, and ontological clarity are usually not points of principle emphasis.

One important aspect of embodiment, then, is that the body witnesses, even at the cellular level, to the immutability of biological sex (and, therefore, biological gender).[11] Embodiment and sexual dimorphism also brings us face to face with sexual complementarity and gives tangible form to the natural connection of sexuality to fecundity and to the concrete otherness of others, including others not yet present (Levinas, 1985). Even granting that biological processes of development and maturation do occasionally not work out perfectly, a person's sexual or, one could say, "gendered" embodiment, at the level of the body itself and not merely its outward appearance, is what it is, and is so in its concrete givenness. To the extent that embodiment undergirds identity, then, one's sexual identity is likewise given. In other words, this is to say that, at the material level, our identity is immutable as well. For LDS Christians, and most other Christians, this truth can be stated even more directly, as it has been in *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*:

> All human beings — male and female — are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.

As this statement declares, there is more to the modern concept of "identity" than just what the body provides (i.e., sex/gender). Contemporary Western culture is quite taken with the notion that we can make out of ourselves whatever we will (i.e., whatever we desire). The brute facts of the material world and its resistance to us, however, impose strong pragmatic limitations on this self-creativity. Nonetheless, we do have significant power and significant leeway to create our non-biological selves. At the heart of this self-creation — the construction of an identity — is the human will and its capacity to imagine and to create and re-create. Though we can certainly construe the circumstances of our embodiment in a variety of ways, and apply to it a variety of meanings, our embodiment is not itself fully complicit in such creativity, it does not inexorably bend to the dictates of our will, but rather constrains and resists the inventiveness of our imagination. Thus, it makes more sense to talk about something like sexual identity, along with preferences and orientations, as being mutable (i.e., subject to creative construction through agentic action). Indeed, we have argued that such things likely are mutable — able to be constituted and re-constituted, done, undone, and redone — precisely because they have their being, their essence, only in agentic acts, even in the context, or perhaps especially in the context, of embodiment with all the possibilities and affordances that embodiment presents to us along with its inherent givenness. Thus, we can hope that mutability might bring about harmony with the given, rather than conflict with the immutable. It is in this context — i.e., while biological sex (or gender) is fixed and immutable, sexual identities, and such things, are constructions which only agentic human beings can create — that we turn attention to the case for genuinely agentic sexuality.

[11] This will hold as true of human beings, regardless of what future exercises in gene splicing or other technological tinkering might produce.

Agentic Sexuality

There is no aspect of our essential humanity that is more fluid (i.e., mutable) than our agency. The fluidity does not attach to whether or not we are agents, but rather to how agency is deployed, and what it might produce. Agentic action is, in its essence, fluid and open-ended. To be human is to be an agent, and to be an agent is to be creative, to be intimately enmeshed in a world of possibility, purpose, and meaning. Agency is the essence of our mutability, our being able to change and do otherwise at any time. The lived world for us exists primarily as possibility and constraint, permeated by meaning and moral significance. Agentic beings are fluid and mutable, though not infinitely so, especially in light of our embodiment and the material world that resists us. Furthermore, we simply cannot bring material things into existence by thinking them or speaking them into existence. We cannot conjure. However, the fact that we are, ontologically, agentic beings is not itself mutable or subject to change, for all the reasons discussed above about metaphysical realities. However, fluidity of action and mutability in the face of possibility, and in the flow of human events, is endemic to all human agents and definitive of agency itself.

None of this is to say, however, that human agency, properly understood, ends up in a chaos of random reasons and impulses that would obviate any predictability or understanding of us and our behavior, as has long been feared in the social sciences. On the contrary, the lifeworld in which human agency unfolds is not chaotic.[12] Chaos (i.e., random, unconstrained change) precludes reasons and thereby destroys meaningful agency. Rather, it is the case that sense can be made of people's agentic actions and their lifeworld. However, if sense is to be made of a person's agentic world, it must be made from the perspective of the particular agent him- or herself, rather than from some "extraspective theoretical (or abstracted) perspective" (Rychlak, 1988), which in the contemporary social science disciplines is generally based on assumptions developed and applied generically, and emphasizing constructs, abstractions, forces, or meat and chemical. In the former, agentic view, agentic life is a constant and purposeful doing, undoing and redoing — in the sense of always being open-ended. In short, one might say that for human beings, "it's agency, all the time, and all the way down."[13] The reality of agentic action unfolds within the very hermeneutic circularity — or spiral trajectory — of life (Slife and Christensen, 2013). In other words, human agency innately entails that what is done is done, but can always be undone (or redone) for any or all of a potentially very large number of reasons. And those reasons can also always be taken up anew (or put down again), taken on, or modified as we give ourselves over to (or hold ourselves back from) them, either fully or by degrees.

Human agency is, we contend, best understood as a constant and endless procession of persons' "taking on" and "giving themselves over to" meaningful possibilities as we construe and construct our lives and ourselves within the possibility-rich (or sometimes, perhaps, possibility-poor) world in which we find ourselves — constantly living and acting with others and among things. It is for this reason that our agentic action in the realm of sexual matters is, as in all other realms of human action, contextual and fully participatory, involving others (both real and imagined). And, moreover, it is in this light that agentic action in the realm of sexual matters is inescapably moral, always tethered to the givenness of life while simultaneously being telic and oriented to the rich possibilities that givenness always affords a rational moral agent. Sexuality as agentic meaning-making is inherently fluid, as fluid as any other kind of meaningful human action, consisting of "taking up" ideas, meanings, and possibilities, and "giving oneself over to" those meanings and possibilities — or, at other times, leaving certain meanings and possibilities behind — in a constant flow of living, deciding,

[12] Any chaos in the unfolding of agency would be of the sort that afflicts humankind generally whenever there is illness, developmental difficulties, impairments, or other things that would produce their chaos even in a completely determined world.

[13] This expression refers to the famous story about the defense of the thesis that the world does not just stand in space, but rather rests on the back of a giant tortoise. The answer to the question as to what the tortoise rests on is "Nothing, its tortoises, all the way down." In other words, agency is a fundamental way of being and not caused by or dependent on other things. It is originative and irreducible (see Gantt et al., 2014).

acting, re-acting, doing, undoing, and doing over. What is apparent in any lived-world, however, is that abstract metaphysical realities (in contrast to human meaning and purpose) are not so fluid or mutable. For example, agency and possibility are inherent in a proposition (and in the lived reality it represents) such as "Smith is a golfer," or "Smith is an English speaker." Such statements can only be understood as something that a person (i.e., Smith) — understood as an agent — is doing. Smith is a golfer because she golfs or is golf-ing. She is not necessarily bound to be a golfer indefinitely, nor is she metaphysically or necessarily a golfer. If she gives up golfing, then she ceases to be a golf-er. The world of human sexual understanding and activity, as opposed to the world of the metaphysically given, is inherently an agentic world of meaning and possibility, in which we actively and creatively immerse ourselves.

What all of this means is that things such as sexual orientation, preference, attraction, and identity are actually descriptions of what a person is doing, not statements of metaphysical "types" or abstractions, or categorical identification of what a person just is. In other words, all of these aspects of our sexuality, since they are things we are doing, are things that can be undone, taken up anew, or put down. As agentic acts, they are the sort of things (i.e., possibilities) to which we can give ourselves over, or reserve ourselves from, as we take up some other possibilities — including the possibilities of desire itself. This is not to say, however, that such agentic becoming otherwise is easy, as habits of thinking and acting are notoriously stubborn. It is to say, however, that there are no metaphysical or lawful constraints on change, and no powerful causal abstractions exercising invisible, compulsive force and constraint on us. That aspect of our sexual nature which genuinely is metaphysically given, and thus not agentic or mutable (i.e., gendered embodiment), provides the givenness, and a range of affordances and opportunities consistent with that reality, within which agentic sexuality can be meaningfully expressed or fought against.

Agency as More than "Free Choice"

Most opposition to the idea that sexuality is radically agentic, as we have proposed here, will likely be rooted in an understanding of human agency that has prevailed for centuries. This is the construal of agency as traditional libertarian free will or "radical choice" (Taylor, 1985). In this construal, agency is manifested most clearly and fundamentally in the capacity for making autonomous or free choices; that is, choices made based on the unfettered will of the agent and the agent's capacity to resist external (or, even, internal) influence (see Williams, 1992, williams2005agency, williams2017freedom). It is important to note here that the belief in invisible, magically powerful abstractions is one of the sources of "influence" that are traditionally held to impact individual "free" choices (or attempts at choosing freely). If, as we have argued above, the powerful abstractions developed in the discourse of our culture really do not exist, or have any real causal power, in themselves, then their influence can lie only in our giving them credence, and allowing them to become the grounds for our "free" choices. But, we argue, a choice made by an agent who gives credence to something that is not true, or is not "the case" is in fact not really free in the way freedom is usually understood. For example, if Smith, as an adult, chose always to sleep on the couch in his home because he believed (sincerely) that there was a monster under the full-sized bed in his apartment, and the monster was too large to fit under the couch, therefore the couch was a safer place to sleep, would we be inclined to grant that Smith's choice is really a free choice — even though he made the choice of his own free will? Would we not, in such a case, be more inclined to consider that Smith is not really exercising his agency because he is living in a false world, bestowing power, in the form of influence, on a false narrative (i.e., on an entity that does not in fact exist except in Smith's own narrative), and therefore has no real causal power except insofar as Smith's narrative grants such power in the very act of his choosing?

Similarly, cultural narratives can obviate freedom and negate human agency on at least two levels. First by creating powerful narratives about ourselves and our world in which invisible, powerful abstractions exist and control many aspects of our lives, including the choices we make based on reasons that reflect our belief in the reality of those

forces, and, thus, our own impotence in the face of such forces' working in our lives. The second level on which our freedom can be negated has to do with whether the various reasons for which we might make our free choices actually reflect truth; that is, the world as it really is, including the truth of our own being-in-the-world.

The common view of agency as described above — as exercising one's freedom to choose in a situation despite influences to the contrary — does not constitute human agency as we really live it out in almost all the situations in which we find ourselves in the course of daily life. The common view tends to emphasize particular specifiable "choice points" and the exercise of agency in a particular situation by weighing alternatives and deliberating on possible choices, while resisting some influences and opting in the direction of other possible influences. The problem is that in actually living our lives we almost never do anything like this. A moment's reflection should be enough to convince us that there really are very few instances in any given day where we really go through the sort of detached, deliberative process of making a free choice that the common view assumes. For the most part, as we go about living, we are just too busy doing what we want to do and what needs to be done. As Taylor (1989) notes:

> [T]he subject is in this world (= field of meanings) as an agent. He acts, he does things. The meanings which things have for him of course reflect this: that delicious bit of pastry attracts him, tempts him to eat it; this edgy social situation is calling for his intervention (either "physically" to stop the fight, or "socially" to say something soothing, change the subject), and so on. The fact that we act, that certain events are our doing, is another primitive, along with the fact that things have meaning for us. This is to say that the distinction within what "happens," in a topic-neutral sense of the term, between what I do and what comes about, is an irreducible one. (pp. 2–3)

Of course, we might assume that true agency is brought out only on special occasions, but this line of thinking misses the ubiquity and the essence of our genuine agency. Our real human agency is not something we employ just on special, sometimes momentous occasions of careful, calculative deliberation. Rather, human agency is the substance of our being-in-the-world. It is the very "stuff" of which human life is composed. And, as such, our agency cannot be disentangled from our very living and acting as the sort of beings we are.

This alternative view of agency developed in this essay can be most readily understood by attending to the experience of agency as actually lived. If we focus on the countless agentic actions we perform in a given day — everything from choosing whether to get up or push the snooze button on the alarm, picking up a glass to drink and putting it down again in the spot we put it rather than somewhere else, making a purchase or foregoing it, phoning or texting a friend or putting it off, doing any one of perhaps hundreds of things we could purposely do in a given day — it becomes clear that we almost never actually stop, lay out competing alternatives, deliberate over them systematically, and then free ourselves from all influence we don't want to influence us, and then exert our own will in order to decide the matter. The common libertarian model of agency is artificial at best, and incoherent at worst. We should note here also that the model of agency as just "free choice" cannot be saved by claiming that the real deliberation and deciding is all done unconsciously, as some models assert (see, e.g., Akram, 2013; Shepherd and Mylopoulos, 2021), and that is the reason we are not aware of doing it. From a conceptual point of view, taking this position and relying on the existence of unconscious minds and/or subconscious processes creates more conceptual and moral problems than it could ever solve, and much worse conceptual problems than the ones we have laid out in our argument about agency in this paper (e.g., the homunculus problem that results in our having two minds to explain instead of just one, etc.).

To understand how we really experience and exercise our agency, we have to focus not on deliberations and choice-making, but on the hundreds or even thousands of things (e.g., ideas, feelings, desires, beliefs, aspirations, worries, traditions, relationships, purposes, and the context of

embodiment) that form the meaningful world of which we are always a part and in which we are always engaged. We are constantly accepting, rejecting, "taking up" the world, or a thought or feeling, accepting or "giving ourselves over" to an idea, a project, an interpretation, a priority, a mistake, a bit of slothfulness, giving ourselves over to our good judgments, or picking up and taking on an excuse for accepting what we really should not, and doing something else instead (Williams and Gantt, 2021). It really is quite unreasonable to believe that there are countless invisible, powerful, abstract causal influences, variables, or biological processes within us and around us, all operating beneath every physical, mental, emotional, and moral experience we have every day, and that these things are somehow connected to each of us as we move through time and the richness of our physical, mental, emotional, and moral lives. The truth is that there are no such unfathomable invisible, magical, abstract determining forces at work. Rather, quite simply, it is we (i.e., holistic, embodied, moral agents) who are at work. This manner of living constitutes the unique manner of being-in-the-world as only agentic beings can be. This is how the rationality that defines and characterizes human beings, and not other living creatures, unfolds in the life — the daily mode of living — of an agent. The crucial part of all this, however, is that agents, no matter how they happen to be in the world now, no matter how they are construing things, how they are "taking up" the world, or what they "giving themselves over" to, can at any instant, for any of perhaps thousands of reasons and invitations, do otherwise . . . or not.

Within this understanding of agency, we can see that agency arises not from the fact that we can supposedly make deliberated decisions free from determining influence, subject only to our "will," but rather that no matter what we as agents are doing, what decisions we are making in any given situation, it really is possible to do or be otherwise. And, even if it is not convenient or easy, it is always nonetheless possible to do something otherwise. Further, we should also note, the power to "do otherwise" comes not from standing apart from one's life and world in order to deliberate about it, but rather it comes as we engage more fully and more seriously in the life we are living, considering things more broadly (or narrowly), adopting new perspectives, questioning ourselves, resurrecting or reconstructing memories, yielding to the Spirit, listening to our conscience, forgiving loved ones, losing ourselves in work . . . and the list goes on. Whatever meaning is "taken up" can be kept or put down, at any time, for a large and fluid number of reasons, any of which might be sufficient to be seized upon and thus to comprise a reason for action — or not. For genuine agents, therefore, whatever is started can be stopped, whatever has been done can be undone, or redone or modified in a potentially very large number of ways and for a potentially very large number of reasons. Agency then, we must be clear, is not some special capacity we have (like choosing from amongst hypothetical alternatives free from any influences we do not want). Agency as described here is the defining character of our very being, our being-in-the-world. It is not one trait or capacity among many. Rather, it is the very essence of our being as the kinds of beings we are. Agency is what we are — but it manifests itself always as what we do, and re-do, and un-do, and so on.

We should acknowledge here that what we describe as the essential modus operandi of human agents (i.e., "taking up or putting off" and "giving oneself over or taking back") can be described loosely or generically as choosing, as making choices. Although the choosing described here is certainly not the deliberative, influence-selective choosing prescribed in traditional libertarian accounts of free will, "taking up" and "giving ourselves over to" might be thought of as a sort of "micro-choosing;" in that, such "choices" are not carefully deliberated nor made in any kind of "time out" from living, and are not necessarily consistent, logical, or decisive. These incidents of "micro-choosing" are generally not clearly available in detail to the agents themselves, because of the hundreds of other things that press on our attention, and the many other things that call our attention and also require choosing at any given time. Thus, these "micro choices" are not lived-out as conscious deliberative choices. They are not the products of detached, neutral self-reflection and assessment. Rather, they are most often only vaguely coherent and can be made ex-

plicit only by some other agentic act of the same sort of which they themselves are a part.[14] But most of the time in the course of a day, most of our agentic "taking up" and "giving over" are not elevated to any level of importance or awareness. However, they can be elevated, focused on, elaborated, and made meaningful — when, for a potentially large number of reasons (perhaps hundreds of reasons not fully articulated) they become important. A passage of scripture from the Book of Mormon offers an example of how agency can be understood as non-deliberative micro-choice that ultimately takes on importance as it comes to the forefront in a choice of great magnitude.

> Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil. (2 Nephi 2:27)

Certainly, the decision between "liberty and eternal life" or "captivity and death" is unlikely to be one that can be or will be made at one magnificent, deliberative choice point. Surely, how one has lived one's life will have agentically set the stage powerfully for any such decision as this. A more likely understanding of the choosing described here is based on the fact that a person's "choosing" eternal life is really constituted by hundreds, if not thousands of "choosings" throughout one's life, the "taking up or putting down," and "giving ourselves over or taking oneself back" that constitutes the rich, meaningful, moral life of agentic sons or daughters of God.

And Ye Shall Know the Truth, and the Truth Shall Make You Free

It needs to be understood, however, that if what we have just described here — i.e., agency as the innate capacity for taking-up or giving ourselves over to meanings for reasons that are always a part of our fluid, mutable being-in-the-world — were all there were to our human agency and to sexuality, neither would be much of a blessing. Indeed, if agency were just that, and only that (i.e., just taking up the world and giving ourselves over to it without regard for just what it is we are taking up and what we are giving ourselves over to), it could hardly serve as the foundation for a moral life or the grounds for moral development. Just always being fluid and mutable, always able to do otherwise, would be at least as likely to lead to moral and epistemological relativism, immorality, and even chaos, as it would lead to something good, such as perfection of the soul. It would be just as likely to lead to sexual confusion and promiscuity as to sexual morality and sacred communion. Just doing otherwise may not lead to true freedom, but may lead us down any number of conceptual, relational, and moral dead ends. What is required for genuine agency, an agency worth having, is access to and a genuine capacity for Truth. There must be a source of truth — that is, knowledge of things as they really are (e.g., D&C 93:24). When truth is available, always being able to "take up" and "give ourselves over to" things that are true, that "really are" is a great blessing and means of safety, progress, opportunity, and openness — the essence of freedom. Absent truth, and the capacity to grasp it and receive it, agency serves no useful purpose,[15] and provides no meaningful freedom. When truth is available, agency can lead to what is usually referred to as "the good and flourishing life" (Thompson et al., 2020). Without truth, agency is meaningless. Without agency, truth is meaningless. After all, what good is truth if we cannot actually live it on purpose? Once again, modern scripture casts some light on the issue:

> Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own

[14] In his 1999 book *The Mismeasure of Desire: The Science, Theory, and Ethics of Sexual Orientation*, philosopher and legal theorist Edward Stein, himself a gay man, draws on the work of developmental psychologist Daryl Bem, arguing that continual, small, seldom noted choices are fundamental to the process of developing a sexual orientation. Although the argument we present here differs from that of both Stein and Bem, we do share common ground on this point (see also Spinelli, 2013, 2014; Stein, 1999; Wilkerson, 2009).

[15] Except as a continual "open door" through which Christ might one day be able to reach us.

> power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down; And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice. (Moses 4:3-4; emphasis added)

Agency is destroyed, or nullified, when truth is not available. The Christian truth of sexuality includes its being bound to covenant relationships. Further, it is intimately and inextricably connected to fecundity and the creating and rearing of families (or, at least, to being open and willing to give oneself to the possibility of doing so). In most Christian traditions, marriage is an ordinance or sacrament that believers enter into willingly, and as moral agents. Sexuality is thus located within the sacred and the agentic in Judeo-Christian traditions (see Campbell, 2003; Lawler, 1996).

It has been common in the literature on human sexuality, both within scholarly discourse and within the lay culture, to contend that "sexuality" is not agentic. Often, this line of argument is based on the observation that sexuality is not agentic because it is phenomenologically (i.e., according to our lived-experience) not the case that people make the kind of special, deliberated decisions about most sexual matters employing the sort of detached, reflective process that libertarian models of free will require as the defining feature of libertarian forms of agency (see Bailey et al., 2016). In other words, many people resist the notion that sexuality is agentic because it just seems to be the case that no one actually deliberates, weighs options, resists unwanted influences, and then rationally, calculatingly, decides on their sexual identity, orientation, gender identity, sexual desires, and so on. Obviously, this is not how such things play themselves out. However, it is also true that this sort of deliberative choosing from amongst options is not how we make most any other important (non-sexual) decisions about ourselves either. This way of deciding and choosing is, indeed, not the natural or ordinary form human agency takes.

In the end, the idea that conscious, deliberative choosing does not apply to sexual matters bears little relevance for our understanding of either sexuality or agency because that kind of choice-making really is artificial and yields understanding of very little even in other (non-sexual) aspects of our lives. Therefore, affirming that one's sexuality is not the product of the calculative or deliberative making of free choices does not entail the conclusion that sexuality must therefore not be agentic in any important way. On the contrary, as our analysis of agency makes clear, when agency is properly understood in terms of our fundamental ontology as irrepressibly meaning-making moral agents, it becomes clear that matters of sexuality, just as all other aspects of our being-in-the-world, can and should be understood as what we are doing, not what we are caused to be or do by any material or abstract forces. Consequently, and in principle, all such doings can be undone, redone, or done differently. This is, of course, not to say that all of the consequences of our agentic acts can be entirely undone, but only that the acts themselves surely did not have to happen as they did and the consequences of our agentic actions can, in many meaningful respects, be altered going forward. Thus, genuine human agency offers an understanding of ourselves in terms of what we do and what we are, and what we really are is not to be understood as any aspect of our material composition or as the convergence of hypothesized abstractions or physical causal forces. Rather, from the perspective we offer here, it is possible to understand ourselves, our identity, and our "sexuality" in terms of what we agentically do, and, thus, at any time, what we meaningfully do really is what and who we really are. Understanding sexuality as agentic, as something we do, preserves meaning, moral purpose, and, most important of all, the genuine possibility of being and doing otherwise.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing analysis, we are brought to the conclusion that human sexuality is an agentic phenomenon in all of its manifestations above the level of the gender that is intrinsic to our eternal nature and identity. Sexuality manifests itself in one's "taking on" and "giving oneself over to" the meanings entailed in sexuality, sexual desires, and sexual possibility, as we

encounter and engage them in the human relationships and purposive activities of our daily lives. In the light of this understanding, then, sexuality is neither something pushed upon us nor pulled out of us. It is no different from, and no more central to, our lives than any other meaningful phenomena we might take on and give ourselves over to. Although, owing to any number of factors based on our shared cultural meanings, and to much of the folklore we take on and give ourselves over to, it well may seem at times that we are pushed or pulled in matters of sexuality. Indeed, sexuality is often presented in ways that may entangle us in any number of problematic theories, ideas, practices, and folkloric tales unless we are critically vigilant and careful about how we think and talk about it.

In sexuality, as in all meaningful engagements in our lives, it takes some effort to maintain a clear view of who and what we are, or what we wish to be. This is the essence of our agency as embodied moral beings. As far as we know, it takes no effort for an oak tree, for example, to be an oak tree, or for a stone to be a stone. Such things simply are as they are.[16] And, for this very reason, there is no intrinsic meaning in being an oak tree or being a stone, nor does it seem to be the case that life means anything to them. This, however, is never the case with human agents because it takes effort to be, to do, and to mean (or intend) and to engage in the constant taking up and giving ourselves over to which is the essence of an agentic and meaningful life. The material world provides us with embodiment, and embodiment provides necessary context for and constraint on both the creative and stabilizing powers of agentic beings. Agentic living requires that we make peace with the givenness of embodiment, just as we must make peace with the passage of time, and the particular and individual characteristics, and even the limitations, of embodiment and the facticity of the world. Embodiment provides as much in the form of affordances as it may in the form of constraints. Importantly, human agents can maximize those affordances.

The view of sexuality we have developed here, as innately and fundamentally agentic, has implications for a wide variety of human activities, including diagnoses and therapies, relationships, and morality. It also has implications for our aspirations, our spirituality, and (perhaps most importantly) our understanding of what it means to be a human being as an eternal moral agent. Agency both reflects and constitutes our very nature as the sort of beings we are. It must be remembered that agency as understood here is as eternal as the soul itself, and testifies to the eternal possibility of doing and being otherwise.

None of our analysis of agentic sexuality should be taken to mean, however, that changes in sexual behavior, identity, orientation, or other manifestations, are easy. Such things are not easy. Indeed, it is often the work of a lifetime to create such things so it is not easy to undo them and create something else. To suggest that it is easy falls into the trap of assuming that agency is essentially libertarian free will, and that change of any sort is simply a matter of exercising one's will in a moment of radical choice. Thus, it is imperative to remember that agency as we have defined it and developed it here does not consist in the making of "free choices." Generally, we cannot simply change sexually relevant phenomena, especially those with long, deeply embedded and personally meaningful histories, by making a single decision to do so. In fact, such attempts might very likely produce frustration — as they would in most cases with other aspects of life. In the end, the most important aspect of this analysis, and the positive news it conveys, is that even if substantive changes in sexually relevant (or any other) actions and meanings in our lives do not come by single grand decisions, that does not rule out the possibility that changes can, in fact, come. How can such changes come? By doing differently in "taking up the world" or "putting it off," and "giving ourselves over to" or "holding oneself back" in regard to any number of relevant alternative ideas, feelings, actions, and possibilities. There is almost never any grand single exercise of effort through which we are able transform for ourselves experientially significant things about ourselves. Rather, it is usually the case that there are dozens, or hundreds, or perhaps even thousands of small

[16]Some might argue that there are any number of chemical things going on in physical objects such as trees and stones. However, trees and stones are not the originative source of such natural processes.

agentic acts through which doing becomes being. The account we offer here is, we believe, a fundamentally hopeful (and hope-filled) account of agency and sexuality. Ultimately, for LDS Christians, it is the offer of atonement extended by Jesus Christ Himself that provides the call, the possibility, the support, the power, and the welcome, in an agentic process of dealing with sexual issues — indeed, with all issues faced by moral agents in a meaningful world of possibilities and purposes. After all, only moral agents need a Savior.

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Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs: Illuminating The Untenable Nature of the "Born That Way" Argument

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Abstract

For decades, our society has entertained the idea that people are born with sexual orientations which are innate and immutable. The natural effect of this approach is to sideline discussions of agency in sexuality, and to hinder the application of traditional morality to diverse sexual behaviors. The approach is also inherently non-developmental and therefore cannot explain the shifts in behavior that we frequently witness in human beings. The article by Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs (this issue) helps us to refocus our attention on agentic sexuality. In my response, I focus on empirical research and societal trends that provide direct or indirect support for the fundamental position of agency in the development of human sexuality. The emphasis of Williams et al. on embodiment is also critical to the ongoing debate over trans identities.

***Keywords*:** sexual orientation, sexual fluidity, expressive individualism, religiosity, suicidality, mixed-orientation marriage, GWAS, trans identities

Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs (this issue) have provided key arguments which, if heeded, may finally help move society away from the old "Born That Way" justification for the uncritical embrace of diverse sexualities. Combined with relevant empirical research, we may eventually foster an appreciation for the nuance and complexity behind sexual development. In particular, to center agency is the only way to properly challenge the liberal orthodoxy that has long dominated human psychology (what the authors call, "the tyranny of the invisible").

As a developmental psychologist, I have found it strange that so many of my colleagues have long favored the "innate and immutable" framing of such a complex set of human behaviors over a developmental, transactional perspective (which is often the default in most areas of behavioral development). What we are dealing with here is the ongoing societal definition of "behavioral" minorities (and an increasingly chaotic array of such). In my response, I want to highlight some of the empirical research and societal conversations which buttress, directly or indirectly, an agentic perspective.

Ironically, as the "Born That Way" argument has gathered strength in the past few decades, the research arrayed against such a deterministic position has become increasingly prevalent. Societal discussions are often ignorant of the latest re-

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search or actively disregard it. In addition, the notion of "embodiment" is immediately relevant to the current expansion of behavioral minorities into gender identities (also addressed below).

The biological determinism approach to sexuality ("sexual orientation") has been popular for many reasons. First and foremost, it seeks to shift the moral debate. In particular, the argument has been critical in formulating a novel civil rights movement (which directly challenges the confines of traditional sexual morality). If sexual and gender identities are biologically fixed, then the only moral issue is that people are enabled to embrace behaviors that accord with "who they authentically are." As long as consent is honored in all sexual interactions, then all sexuality is inherently good (a central tenet of the "sex positivity movement"). From this perspective, a primary focus of queer ideology is "the end of repression of all sexual expression." The argument takes on all of the trappings of a civil rights focus and presses urgently forward in search of liberation.

Sexual Fluidity and Identity

If sexual and gender identities are in flux, however, then the civil rights argument is undermined. Dr. Lisa Diamond, a professor of developmental psychology, has been at the forefront of research on "sexual fluidity," which is highly relevant here. Williams et al. (this issue) briefly touch on this topic, and I will say quite a bit more about it.

In a talk given over a decade ago (Cornell University, 2013), Diamond demonstrated with large, representative samples of adults (followed over developmental time in several nations) that those who experience same-sex attraction rarely report it to be an "exclusive" attraction. Rather, it is usually bisexual in nature and most bisexuals self-describe as "mainly heterosexual." Substantial shifts between sexual categories are also unexpectedly common over the course of human development.

Speaking in 2017 of her original sample of women that she has personally followed over time, Diamond stated that she expected fluidity to settle down as women mature and find their "true" selves (To The Best of Our Knowledge, 2017). In contrast, she stated that, "...I found that the longer I followed them, the more women started to change, so that by the time I reached the 10-year point, and now I'm at the 20-year point, "change is substantially more common than stability" [emphasis added]."

Diamond considers fluidity to be a general feature of human sexuality and, by extension, that sexual "orientation" is an imprecise heuristic that inadequately explains a messy developmental phenomenon. From a sexual fluidity perspective, one should not talk about one's sexual orientation, as if it is some stable, natural state of being. One could more accurately refer to what one "currently" thinks, says, or does about sexual matters (as Williams et al. propose). Diamond has herself been in a same-sex relationship for more than two decades. Yet, she freely acknowledges in the 2017 interview that fluidity is always possible: "I should be the first person to say, 'I'm a lesbian now, [but] who the hell knows."'

When developmental shifts in human sexual behavior are likely to occur is still a mystery for science ("sexual fluidity" remains a black box phenomenon in psychology). But the possibility of change is always present. In many cases, an agentic change of heart accords with variation in how individuals respond to sexual feelings. For example, religious conversion may supplant homosexual identity with a religious world view. Fluidity may also shift gradually over time, as experiences accumulate and redefine one's perceptions. For example, Ty Mansfield (2014) has described his own personal journey with homosexual attraction and religious identity in this manner:

> "Elder Neal A. Maxwell [former leader for the LDS Church] spoke often of the need to 'educate our desires' because it is the desires of our hearts that will determine our destiny, not proximate human experiences. I've found it to be much more useful to think about the 'education of desire' and even the 'education' of my sexuality ... There was a time when my attractions to men were so strong that even though I was committed to living the gospel [of Jesus Christ], I didn't believe I'd ever marry [a woman] because I simply didn't feel I ever could. Over the last ten

> years since that time, however, with growth in self-awareness and even addressing therapeutically factors that I believe, for me, influenced my sexuality, the way I experience my sexuality now is fundamentally, qualitatively different than it was ten years ago. While I still occasionally experience attraction to men, my *desires* are such that I can't tell you the last time I desired a same-sex relationship. I desire only to be with my wife and family."

Accordingly, although same-sex attraction may not completely fade, broadening of sexual attraction is possible.

When the case against the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was before the U.S. Supreme Court, Diamond's research on sexual fluidity was called on to buttress arguments to maintain DOMA, rather than striking it down (Cornell University, 2013). In particular, a common test for equal protection under the law is that any group arguing for such must have a trait that is discrete and immutable. The ubiquity of sexual fluidity argues effectively against this narrow definition. Yet, remarkably, the equal protection status issue never managed to come up in DOMA arguments at the Supreme Court (as Diamond described it, "We dodged a bullet!" (Cornell University, 2013)). She then argued that "innate and immutable" is an unworkable approach and, besides, equal protection should *not* be needed to justify a civil rights movement for LGB individuals.

By 2018, Diamond explicitly called in a TED talk for the "Born That Way" argument to be abandoned (Diamond, 2018). She argued that it is scientifically inaccurate and can never account for late bloomers (who find their "true" sexuality later in life) or those who fluidly cross categorical boundaries. She alternatively proposed to affirm *all* sexual and gender identities, regardless of their potentially inconsistent nature (seemingly a nod to the "sex positivity" movement).

Expressive Individualism and Authenticity

The fact that Diamond endorses an open-ended approach to defining appropriate sexual or gender expression only deepens the moral quagmire. A necessary moral analysis is replaced with "expressive individualism"—a felt obligation to one's "currently" desires, whatever they happen to be. The "tyranny of the invisible", whatever its "current" nature, is readily embraced with this perspective. "Authenticity" requires that old concepts and constraints of sexual expression be abandoned so that one may fully express one's selfhood.

An all-inclusive sexual morality is now trending, which constantly expands its identity groups (as exemplified by the "+" sign following LGBTQ+). As such, this argument is ambiguous and imprecise. It is unlikely that society would ever endorse *all* sexual identities. In contrast, in the case of traditional morality, religious doctrine narrowly sets the boundaries of sexual expression, consistent with an altogether different vision of human purpose and flourishing. Traditional morality rejects the symbolic LGBTQ+ rainbow with its infinite possibilities and inherent contradictions (more about those contradictions below).

As Williams et al. (this issue) profess, the expressive individualism approach "...ultimately strips all human acts and desires, sexual or otherwise, of any intrinsic meaning or moral substance—except insofar as the individual musters up some personal significant and manages to attach it for themselves to maintain some semblance of moral weight in a world of their own making, a world necessarily untethered to any outside, anchoring truth."

Williams et al. (this issue) are therefore correct to underscore the "fundamental incoherence in contemporary social science accounts of sexuality." The sexual identity movement is far more ideological than empirical in its foundations. Moreover, despite sexual fluidity research, the innate and immutable perspective remains popular and is often dogmatically defended. In particular, the "Born That Way" argument is regularly wielded as a political weapon against traditional faith groups which maintain an emphasis on agentic sexuality. In recent years, a steady drumbeat of accusation paints such faith groups with the same broad brush—they are motivated by animus and are therefore responsible for the relatively high suicidal ideation rate among individuals in LGBTQ+ groups. There is considerable

pressure placed on conservative groups to abandon their principles or doctrines and embrace expressive individualism. The argument is that such institutions need to be remodeled in order to provide a "safe space" for diverse sexual and gender identities, in particular.

Safety in Traditional Religious Contexts

Yet current research demonstrates that traditional religious contexts may be generally considered a protective environment for all members, including those who may embrace an LGBQ identity. For example, a newly published meta-analysis by Lefevor et al. (2021) found a small but positive overall relation between spirituality/religiosity and health for sexual minorities. A couple of recent studies which particularly focus on LDS culture similarly find a protective influence.

In one study focusing on BYU students, Klundt et al. (2021) reported that religiosity (predominantly focused on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)) acted as a protective factor for both heterosexual and sexual minority identity groups, although the effect was weaker for the latter group. In addition, Dyer, Goodman, and Wood (2022), tapping a survey of more than 86,000 6th-12th graders in the state of Utah, demonstrate that membership in the LDS faith protects youth of all backgrounds, particularly in comparison with youth who claim no religion.

Specifically, they found that suicidal ideation among heterosexual LDS youth is half of that found for youth with no religious affiliation (12% vs. 26%). In comparison, the ideation rate for LGBQ youth is twice as high as heterosexual peers among LDS adherents (28%), but that rate is still far lower than among those claiming no religious beliefs (49%). Although any percentage of individuals deliberating suicide is troubling, it is still worth noting that the majority of LGBQ youth (72%) who are affiliated with the LDS faith are not experiencing suicidal ideation. Heterosexual youth, as well, are not fully protected by their "majority" status. Religiosity is just one factor among many in the lives of troubled youth.

The dynamic between faith and feelings is not singularly represented by one particular script. The details of this data analysis specifically point to good family environments and low drug exposure as key protective factors against suicidal ideation. As Dyer suggested in an email exchange, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is, on average, very good at producing strong family ties and low drug use. In fact, given other research, it's likely one of the very most effective organizations in doing so" (personal communication, October 27, 2021). One can argue that LDS doctrines concerning eternal families and respect for one's bodily health (the Word of Wisdom) undergird these specific protective factors. We may also expect that doctrines pertaining to sexual morality and agency provide protection in a number of important ways.

It is important to also note that 2019 CDC data show that suicidality is higher for LGBQ youth in *every* state and locale across the nation. For example, in ultra-liberal (and low religious) San Francisco, suicidal ideation for heterosexual, LG, and B youth are 12.4%, 39.0%, and 45.2%, respectively. It therefore appears that living in a faithful LDS environment in Utah is actually better for LGB youth than living in San Francisco (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). The question must therefore be expanded to consider a broad range of factors that create risk for LGBQ youth, even in areas with very high LGBQ acceptance. Religious perspectives that embrace agentic sexuality cannot be supposed to be the sole or predominant source of tension or stress. In fact, religion appears to have an ameliorative influence for the most at risk.

The Reality of "Mixed-Orientation" Marriages

An agentic sexuality perspective also provides a greater range of options for the future of same-sex attracted youth than the old dichotomy of affirmation vs. suppression/depression. One possibility (that is rarely celebrated) is what social scientists call the "mixed-orientation marriage", wherein an individual who experiences same-sex attraction embraces a heterosexual marriage (as a demonstration of agentic sexuality). Note that the very label of these marriages still reflects a biased emphasis on fixed sexual orientation.

Lisa Diamond has made clear that such a phenomenon is tenable, in keeping with the research on sexual fluidity. In an interview with *KUER Ra-*

dio West years ago (Fabrizio, 2014), she spoke, referring to LDS men who experience same-sex attraction:

> "Could you develop an erotic relationship with your heterosexual wife over time if you love her enough? Possibly. Now, is that a worthwhile project to undertake in a marriage, knowing that it might not work? Maybe not. But I have actually had some really profound conversations with LDS men here in Utah who have ... said ... 'I'm basically a gay man and I'm married. And my marriage is going pretty well, and I have an unbelievable bond to my wife. And I have not been able to understand why I can have such a strong bond to my wife, even though ... I am attracted to men. And your book helps me understand why' ... Does our kind of erotic and affectional phenomenology allow for that? Yes. I think it does."

Ty Mansfield and his colleagues have also collected relevant data as part of the Reconciliation and Growth Project (focused on the interface of sexual and religious identities). In their Four Options Online Survey (conducted in 2016-2017), they collected data with nearly 1800 individuals (53.8% LDS) who predominantly identified as either LGB (54.4%) or SSA (Same-Sex Attracted; 37.8%). The individuals were then categorized into one of four sexual and religious identity groups. For those who were religiously orthodox, they could be (1) single and celibate or (2) in a mixed-orientation relationship. For those who were religiously liberal, they could be (1) single and not celibate, or (2) in a same-sex relationship.

In the first study to be published from these data, individuals were asked if they were satisfied with their current arrangement (Lefevor et al., 2019). Those in the single groups (celibate or not) registered lower satisfaction overall ($\sim$40%). But for the same-sex relationships and mixed-orientation relationships, satisfaction rates were high (95% and 80%, respectively). Current cultural and social science narratives suggest that individuals in mixed-orientation marriages should inevitably struggle as there is a mismatch between their supposedly "innate sexual drive" and their actual sexual relationship. The 80% satisfaction rate is certainly not in keeping with this expectation.

There is another statistic in the same study that suggests that mixed-orientation relationships defy cultural expectations. Individuals in mixed-orientation relationships reported significantly longer relationship durations than the same-sex relationship comparison group ($\sim$2.1 times longer overall: 17.16 years ($SD = 12.20$) vs. 8.05 years ($SD = 8.59$)). This finding suggests that agentic sexuality that is concordant with what Latter-Day Saints consider fundamental doctrine (complementary of man and woman in marriage) potentially creates the most optimal environment for relationship stability, even in the midst of same-sex attraction. It is possible that bringing children into the world may provide another layer of meaning that contributes to relationship satisfaction and stability. It may also be argued, as Williams et al. (this issue) suggest, that a sense of agentic sexuality creates meaning, purpose, and proactive, self-initiated change that promotes enduring marital relationships.

In Search of a "Gay Gene"

Another area of evidence that argues against the oversimplicity of the "Born That Way" argument is the genetic research that has been completed since the mapping of the human genome. Early enthusiasm for the possibility of finding the "gay gene" has given way to evidence-based perspectives showing that genes may play a small and limited role in influencing sexual desire. A (genetically) deterministic perspective can thereby give way to a more nuanced perspective that includes agency.

In 2019, a group of researchers conducted what is called a "Genome-Wide Association Study", with nearly a half million genomes in their sample (Ganna et al., 2019). This was an unprecedented sample size. The authors found that no one gene alone could account for more than 1% of sexual variation in the sample. Looking across all of the genes that were simultaneously considered, genetics could only explain 8-25% of sexual variation (the wide range in this estimate reflects

the possible influence of chance (spurious) findings, given how many genes were simultaneously tested for an association). In the end, only 5 genes stood out in this analysis, and the authors concluded that there is indeed, "no gay gene." Any genetic influence on sexual orientation must therefore be polygenic. Environmental variables (and agentic action, as well) are likely sources of influence in the development and change of a polygenic trait.

Being vs. Experiencing

The beauty of the Williams et al. (this issue) approach is that it avoids the pitfalls of either biological reductionism or radical free choice. An agentic perspective allows for individuals to experience same-sex attraction, for example, and still allow for agency in determining what is to be done with such feelings.

The distinction is clearly relevant as in the Latter-Day-Saint context we often talk about two groups: those who "identify" as LGBQ or those who say that they "experience" same-sex attraction (SSA) but do not claim a fixed sexual identity. Lefevor et al. (2020) have probed this issue with a sample of 1,128 individuals (LGBQ or SSA) who currently identify or previously identified as members of the Mormon faith. They found that those who claim an LGBQ identity are likely to favor scientific or social perspectives about sexuality over LDS Church teachings regarding sexuality (thereby focusing on "affirming" influences). In contrast, those who self-describe as SSA tend to do the opposite—they are more likely to favor Church teachings (focusing on "traditional morality" and identity). Importantly, these data do not show any difference between these two groups in their mental health outcomes. This suggests that the SSA group may be finding a healthy alternative to the blanket affirmation perspective that is so commonly called for by LGBTQ advocates.

Fluidity and the "True" Self

One bit of trouble that naturally arises when an individual adopts an LGBTQ identity, only to fluidly change it later, is that it is difficult to claim that the "true self" has in fact been revealed (if "authenticity" is supposed to be an innate and immutable foundation of subconscious identity). We are left to wonder if an individual has engaged in self-deception or false consciousness if they make a switch. With a new identity, the "truth" would seem to finally emerge, but there are no guarantees that change cannot recur (fluidity is *always* possible).

Williams et al. (this issue) therefore point to something fundamental when they suggest that many sexual identities only exist because they have been thought of. They further state, "... our identity is largely of our own making, not hovering somewhere waiting to be discovered, realized, or obeyed." From this angle, it is impossible to know what is or is not true if the definition of such is inherently subjective. Expressive individualism (often referred to as "living one's truth") seeks to supplant revealed or objective truth, yet it is susceptible to winds of change.

Many of today's sexual and gender identities are recent creations, and more are yet to come (the potential possibilities are infinite—as numerous as the colors of the rainbow). For example, "pansexuality" has only in the past decade entered the mainstream of cultural discourse. It is often defined as "falling in love without consideration of the person's physical attributes or gender identity." In the 1990s, in contrast, only heterosexual and homosexual identities were presented in our culture as options. Lesbian and gay activists in the 1990s also derided self-identified "bisexuals" as closeted homosexuals (arguing that if you experience homosexual attraction, you must be gay; claiming both was considered disingenuous). Yet each of these "orientations" are now claimed to be "true" manifestations of sexual identity, because more than a few individuals have embraced any one category (thereby creating some sort of group cohesion and identity).

People are also creating sexual "orientations" that go well beyond the LGB conception of primary sexual attraction (what some people also call "genital preference"). As Mansfield (2014) has suggested, being heterosexual, in the strictest categorical sense, could be simplistically construed to mean that a heterosexual man is attracted to any and all women he may come in contact with. But that is clearly false, as most people do not declare such open-ended attraction. In contrast, we often talk in exclusionary terms about a specific type of individual we will find attractive for life (e.g.,

finding "Mr. Right"). We narrow romantic engagement to a certain "type" of individual (based on the established social psychology principle that "Birds of a Feather Flock Together").

For example, a "demisexual" (a label subjectively coined only in 2006) focuses on sexual desire that is emergent only after deep emotional connection (Iqbal, 2019). Consider also the sexual "orientation" of a "sapiosexual", a person who discovers sexual arousal and attraction solely in interaction with highly intelligent people. Returning to Diamond's research, her early research focused on women (aged 16-23) who found that a deep relationship could unexpectedly lead to a shift in sexual identity or attraction (e.g., a woman who had long self-defined as exclusively heterosexual found a lesbian relationship suddenly viable with a particular female friend). Such categories and descriptions of fluidity vaguely hint at a complex interaction of agency (voluntary bonding with individuals with specific traits) and environmental or biological influences. For self-professed demisexuals and sapiosexuals, respectively, "emotional connection" or "intelligent conversation" appear to overrule the primacy of sexual "orientation" (or "genital preference").

Embodiment vs. Trans Identity

Williams et al. (this issue) have also presented arguments that are useful in considering the newly mainstreamed world of trans-identities. The whole notion of transness is that one can suggest that one's inner self may deviate from the objective reality of one's outer self, and fluidity may also promise shifts over time. In contrast, Williams et al. (this issue) emphasize the importance of embodiment. As they say, "…[biological] sex is instantiated in the physical body …This biological fact seems to be immutable."

Embodiment constrains us in fundamental ways, and any transgender-identified individual is ultimately aware of these constraints, yet hopes to override them. The transgender movement has posited that science will rectify all impediments placed by our natural embodiment through medicalization of the condition. Hormonal and surgical investments are to modify the body in a way that one's "true" self can be "affirmed" (e.g., "passing" for the opposite sex). But a fair number of individuals (who went through medical transition) are now reporting on all of the side effects of tinkering with the delicate hormonal balance of a body that is either biologically male or female. Natal women who take testosterone, for example, will talk about how it fundamentally changes their personalities (more aggressive, both physically and sexually, and less likely to cry) and also leads to painful physical regression (such as vaginal atrophy) and sterility. We are reminded, on a basic biological level, that natal sex (and harmonious hormonal environment) matters.

LGB vs. T

Ironically, in seeking to override the immutable reality of natal sex, transgender activists simultaneously obliterate the foundations of sexual identity. The categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality are (simplistically) based on the immutability of the natal sex binary (an attraction based on fundamental anatomical differences between males and females). When transgender activists insist that our natal sex (embodiment) is overruled by a separate gender identity, they simultaneously nullify the notion of homosexuality. After all, if natal sex is not real, then there is no way to distinguish heterosexuality and homosexuality (as genitals need not accord with gender identity). Some transgender activists have even argued that a gay-identified man is actually a woman trapped in a man's body (who desires a "heteronormative" sexual relationship). There seems to be no quick resolution to this ideological contradiction.

In the LDS Family Proclamation (published in 1995), gender is proposed as "an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose." From this perspective, our gender existed before we experienced embodiment. President Oaks took care to clarify, in October, 2019, "Binary creation is essential to the plan of salvation …The intended meaning of 'gender' in the family proclamation and as used in Church statements and publications since that time is biological sex at birth." The promise of coherence between one's natal sex and expressed gender is plainly evident in this clarification (and was a mainstream perspective for the bulk of hu-

man history).

What objective evidence exists that an individual may be born in the "wrong" body? This question is instructive for all emerging trans identities, not just those dealing with gender. What would a "trans-age" identity do to fundamentally change our notions of developmental age and personal responsibility? If an adult can claim to be "perpetually" younger (say, a "feeling" that they are "fixed" at the age of 20), would we ever expect such an individual to take on the demands of adulthood? If a 50-year-old individual suddenly identified as age 25, would the events and decisions of a portion of an established lifespan (prior years 26-50) suddenly disappear? As Williams et al. (this issue) notes, the ramifications for salvation history are indeed sobering.

A unique form of chaos promises to envelop our society as we increasingly abandon agentic sexuality and a respect for embodiment. The fickle nature of expressive individualism makes it likely that sexual and gender identities will endlessly proliferate, and will also be inherently unstable over time. An example from Hollywood, in which an individual has twice found "authenticity" in LGBTQ+ identities, provides perspective. Just over a year ago, Ellen Page, a Hollywood star who first came out as lesbian in 2014, announced she was now embracing a transgender identity (and a new name of Elliot). When she originally came out as lesbian, she proudly proclaimed, "I am here today because I am gay . . . I am tired of hiding . . . I suffered for years because I was scared to be out." And yet, remarkably, about 6.5 years later, Elliot Page said, "I can't begin to express how remarkable it feels to finally love who I am enough to pursue my authentic self." Page has now found the "authentic self" twice in the list of LGBTQ+ acronyms, suggesting that the prior lesbian identity was "inauthentic"—that her lesbian pride was in fact an act of self-deception. Can one "true" self really be abandoned for another "true" self? The Page saga is not the only recent example, and it is likely that many others will follow suit. When we give undue emphasis to "currently" feelings as the primary arbiters of reality, we open Pandora's Box to allow for any and all sexual or gender identities to claim status as innate and immutable realities (until, of course, fluidity "occurs").

Order vs. Chaos

Once one considers the chaotic landscape that is emergent from our current societal reliance on unstable sexual and gender forces, it seems rather simple to propose that we are best served by revealed truths which give proper focus and emphasis. As Williams et al. (this issue) rightly suggest, it is most accurate to refer to what one "currently" thinks, says, or does about sexual (or gender) matters, which also allows us to embrace divine commandments which are intended to keep us tethered to reality and on a gospel path. As we view gender and sexuality through a gospel prism, we are most likely to achieve the purpose of sexual union—eternal families and identities, properly situated. I express my thanks to Richard Williams and his colleagues for their helpful illumination of these truths.

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The Power in Rescuing Agency: A Response to Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs' Agentic Sexuality

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Abstract

In challenging the prevailing logic that one's sexuality, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and the myriad of other related abstractions determine our experience of sexual embodiment, Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs' article, "Embodied Moral Agency as Foundation: Human Sexuality as a Test Case" offers us a profound gift. Uncovering the reality that our own agency is the source of sexual behaviors, understandings, and meanings, expands awareness of our capacity as well as our responsibility. Most importantly, rescuing a true understanding of the agentic nature of sexuality breaks apart the false choice offered our LGBT brothers and sisters, opening a meaningful world of unending possibility through the infinite power of Christ. Examples of that hope are provided through personal accounts of such individuals.

***Keywords*:** agency, sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual identity, agentic sexuality

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I am honored to respond to the incisive and insightful piece by Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs, "Embodied Moral Agency as Foundation: Human Sexuality as a Test Case." As Williams et al. (this issue) explain, "Sexuality" has widely come to be understood as something we possess, that operates on us and causes us to do what we do and desire what we desire. As a force that acts upon us, we must either accept it or try (sometimes desperately) to control it, unnaturally creating a split in our personhood, "as we become both an 'identity' and a 'person' apart from that identity."

Yet, "sexuality" as merely a descriptor of thoughts, perceptions, and experiences related to sex cannot exist as an entity that acts in and of itself. Thoughts, perceptions, and experiences only exist through the "acts of thinking, observing and experiencing." Thus, sexuality is something we do (not something done to us) in the process of being human, a reality in which we are continually acting — "accepting, rejecting, 'taking up' the world, or a thought or feeling, accepting or 'giving ourselves over' to an idea, a project, an interpretation, a priority, a mistake, a bit of slothfulness, giving ourselves over to our good judgments, or picking up and taking on an excuse for accepting what we really should not, and doing something else instead. . . "

In challenging the prevailing logic that one's sexuality, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and the myriad of other related abstractions determine our experience of sexual embodiment, Williams et al. (this issue) have offered us a profound gift.

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They have expanded our awareness of our own agency, a gift that means everything. As Gantt recently quoted in this journal, "no being can possess sensibility, rationality, and a capacity for happiness without it" (Warner, 1992, p. 26). Indeed, genuinely helpful, meaningful psychological therapeutic efforts depend on the truth that human beings are fundamentally moral agents, with the capacity to "act for themselves and not be acted upon," to determine their way of being in the world. If it were not so, therapeutic efforts would have little meaning. Sexual behaviors and understandings and meanings would already be predetermined by abstract causal forces, making it impossible to engage differently, even if one might hope or desire or believe differently. Seeing sexuality as agentic means the genuine possibility of hope, purpose, capacity, and change.

That is a profound gift, but not an easy one. In uncovering the reality of agency as the source of our sexual behaviors, understandings, and meanings, Williams et al. (this issue) have expanded awareness of our capacity, as well as our responsibility. Rather than being caused, destined and determined by forces outside our control, it is we as individuals who are actively creating how we relate to and experience the reality of our sexual embodiment. This means turning upside down the narratives currently offered to our LGBTQ brothers and sisters and doing that in the face of powerful messages that would want to deny the possibility of anything else.

Doug Mainwaring, a gay man whose story went viral some years ago described the Hobson's choice presented to same-sex attracted men and women, especially young people: "Either jump out of the closet, join the celebration, make being gay or lesbian the dominant characteristic of your life and the sole foundation of your identity—or remain 'closeted,' deny yourself, choose a false identity, become depressed, and risk suicide" (Mainwaring, 2013). His words paralleled closely the description of this false choice by faithful, gay, Latter-day Saint, Bennett Borden in a recent interview: "I can act on my feelings, be in a gay relationship, feel like I've got some connection, and be out of the church. Or I can keep my covenants, stay in the church, and die a horrible, lonely death" (Francom, 2021, 45:00).

Their poignant description of this trapped choice captures the deep concern of many faithful among us. As one of my valiant Latter-day Saint students recently described about her wrestle with the seeming irreconcilability of the real needs of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters and what was asked of them in living a life faithful to the doctrines of the Restored Gospel: "Does our doctrine really mean people who identify as LGBT don't ever get to experience a fullness of love and meaning in this life? Does it really mean that they must sit through meeting after meeting hearing about the joys of family life while feeling like they can never have one of their own? What do we actually expect them to do with their lives? What are the options for them?" Surely the only reasonable response could be "that a truly loving God would not do such things."

Agentic sexuality breaks apart the false choice given our LGBT brothers and sisters, opening up a genuinely meaningful world of possibility, unique to each person, their own narrative infinitely expanded through the call, possibility, support, power, and open arms extended by Jesus Christ Himself.

This does not mean that answers immediately become easy. In fact, agentic sexuality does not mean we have unending choices. As Williams et al. (this issue) explain, our bodies constrain us "in important ways" even as they provide "the necessary context" for us to engage as moral agents "in a world of which sexually relevant thoughts, actions, and feelings are a part." The biological reality of our bodies means "relentless demands on us" that "limit the boundless expression of our will." That reality should invite our greatest compassion, our most sincere efforts to listen, understand, and support. But as Williams et al. (this issue) make clear, we can feel assured that not at any point is agency removed, only the "possibilities and consequences of its expression." Whatever our biological realities, we are always acting — engaged in a "constant and endless procession of 'taking on' and 'giving ourselves over to' meaningful possibilities as we construe and construct our lives within the possibility-rich (or sometimes, perhaps, possibility-poor) world of our lives."

Which is why as Williams et al. (this issue) acknowledge, truth is so critical. Genuine agency

requires access to truth, knowledge of things "as they really are," so we may "take up" and "give ourselves over to" things that are true. It is the truth that sets us free, taking us out of old ways of seeing and being into ways of relating we might never have thought possible.

Ty Mansfield poignantly captures this reality in describing his own journey of expanded hope, possibility, and meaning. As a single adult, wrestling with the meaning of his own biological reality, Truth opened to him a whole new way of relating to his "sexuality," enabling him to "give himself over," to a new way of seeing and being, one full of possibility (Mansfield and Mansfield, 2012).

> I was struggling at the time with some confusion around some deep emotional connections I was feeling with another guy. It hurt that I couldn't have what a piece of me really wanted. I needed some comfort and, since it happened to be General Conference time, I wrote down some of my most heartfelt questions and went into the first session of conference fasting. As soon as the opening prayer was shared, I felt this spiritual feeling completely envelop me; I hardly remember anything that was said during the session, but the feeling I had was unlike anything I've ever felt. For nearly the whole two hours, all the hurt, the pain, the confusion, the frustration. . . was completely gone. In its place was a feeling of Divine Love I had only ever experienced something similar to once before. And yet this was also different. As a part of this experience, there was a feeling of what I understood as pure Celestial love and desire to be with a daughter of God in the most holy and connected and uniting of ways—a way that made even "heterosexual" love and romance—as commonly portrayed or expressed today—seem cheap/primal and "false" in comparison. And with the feeling came the voice: "Just stay with me. If you do, this is the feeling you will feel someday. And it will be eternal." The only way I can describe it is as a "vision" of feeling. Along with the brief and very clear spiritual communication. Then, the "vision" ended.

Ty continues,

> I believe strongly that I would not be where I am today—I would not be happily married with five beautiful children who bring so much joy to my life—if I hadn't been granted some small glimpse into Divine Love that has left me feeling like "heterosexuality"—particularly as it's most often portrayed in popular media today—is something relatively shallow and not what I ultimately should be pursuing. I want and pray for and pursue and continually seek to develop a capacity for Love that I believe is much more transcendent. These experiences are mine alone, and I own that. Others may feel or believe or have felt guided differently, and that's totally fine, but that instruction and other instruction since then has been foundational to my own personal faith and life journey. It has helped me to unpack what I see as a lot of bad ideas and assumptions about sexuality and love and identity in our culture.

Charlie Bird describes his own experience with the Divine, and the transformative influence of Truth made possible because of the agentic reality of sexuality. Exhausted from years of hiding in fear and shame about his same-sex attraction, he desperately pleaded (again) for help. In that moment he heard these words:

> "I love you. I created you." He continues, "They were simple words, but they transformed me. I realized that God didn't hate me. He wasn't ashamed of who I was. He hadn't messed up when He made me. . . The insight was the green light I needed

> to ask deeper questions... As I meditated and prayed, I received deeply personal answers concerning the nature of my orientation and its role in my personal spiritual progression... God was the architect of my soul. As I came to a better understanding of my relationship with Him, I began to see my peculiarity from an entirely new perspective... I finally understood: Christ's Atonement wasn't there to alter my orientation; it was there to heal my heart. Jesus suffered and subjected Himself to my pain so He could lift me from the heavy burdens of shame, hatred and confusion I carried." (Bird, 2020, p. 15).

Real life stories are powerful windows into the truthfulness of the principles Williams et al. (this issue) present. And there are so many more. They are stories of hope made possible because awareness of one's agency around sexuality was expanded by truth, changing how these individuals were able to "be" and relate to their own biological realities. Such change would not be possible were it not for truth that our sexuality is indeed agentic.

Williams et al. (this issue) have not laid out answers to the host of questions that must surely follow such a powerful divergence from the deterministic cultural narratives and taken-for-granted assumptions we swim in. But they have offered us a foundation for going forward in the pursuit of genuine help and hope.

Surely, expanding awareness of our agency around sexuality means asking more questions — questions about the assumptions that underlie the thoughts, perceptions, behaviors, and experiences we tie to sexual feelings, and why those are the assumptions. Expanding awareness of agentic sexuality is also the increasingly important work of sexual mindfulness, "to cultivate space to evaluate and make a choice in the matter, rather than take it as an obvious given" by bringing awareness to how we are choosing to identify with our experiences (physically, emotionally and mentally) and "expanding options in how we relate to what we are experiencing" (Hess et al., 2020).

The purpose of this effort is to expose the truth that we are agents, we do have choice — perhaps not in terms of immediate sexual feelings — but as Jacob Hess wisely explains, "in the story we adopt about what those feelings mean" (Hess, 2021). In that is hope, possibility, capacity to live according to our deepest beliefs and most sacred commitments, and in that, the possibility of genuine joy. We come to know that God really can be the architect of our souls. Through expanding our awareness of our own agency, and our ability to access His Atoning power, we find that He is able to work more in and through us than we might ever have thought possible, and infinitely more than the narratives offered to us by others.

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Considerations on Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs' Arguments for Agentic Sexuality

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Abstract

Sex and sexuality are increasingly dominating social discourse. The prevailing orientation of this discourse affirms facets of sexuality (e.g., orientation, identity) as real and inherent features of individuals. In other words, individuals could not choose otherwise. Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs challenge this position and assert that sexuality is fundamentally agentic. I discuss their arguments, pointing out what I view as strengths and a potential shortcoming of their position.

***Keywords*:** sexuality, agency

Issues regarding sexuality, sexual behavior, and their consequences have come to dominate the social and political landscape of our day. For example, disputes over limits on abortion and the durability of Rowe vs Wade have been in the news. Additionally, cases of business owners declining to provide goods and services for events they deem morally objectionable on grounds of issues related to sexuality have become more prominent. Finally, the limitations of religious institutions' ability to discriminate based on issues of sex and sexuality continues to be challenged. Sex and sexuality seem to be finding their way into ever more facets of our lives, even into areas where they may have once seemed irrelevant. For people of faith, who have strongly held beliefs about sex and sexuality, there is a growing urgency to understand these issues in a way that is coherent, defensible, and consistent with religious doctrines and principles. Williams, Gantt, Christensen, and Tubbs take on this project in their piece "Embodied Moral Agency as Foundation: Human Sexuality as a Test Case" (this issue).

Williams et al. address causal theories of sexuality in contemporary psychology (i.e., what is the source of what we call sexuality?)(this issue). The two major thrusts of their critique are to demonstrate the inadequacy of accepted theories and to demonstrate that these theories do not allow humans to be responsible for their sexuality or sexual behavior. They then propose an agentic explanation of sexuality that makes humans responsible for their sexuality and sexual behavior. The authors suggest that many popular articulations of the source of sexuality are either contradictory or incoherent. For example, if sexuality is a merely biological phenomenon, then it is essential and immutable, and humans cannot be accountable for controlling it or changing it. However, contemporary psychologists and psychological theories are committed to the fluidity of all aspects of sexuality. Both positions cannot be true, but rather than develop a coherent account of human sexuality, modern psychology (wittingly or not) seems to have largely defaulted to an al la carte approach, choosing theories that, under the spe-

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cific circumstances, best suit an agenda of human blamelessness. In order to assert human responsibility for sexuality, Williams et al. propose a model that makes sexual identities, thoughts, feelings, desires, and orientations agentic (this issue). The theory is based on rejecting explanations of sexuality that rely on reified abstractions (e.g., sexual identity, sexual orientation). In the field of applied behavior analysis, we call these reified abstractions hypothetical constructs that become explanatory fictions (Cooper et al., 2020). The problem is, using hypothetical constructs as causal explanations leads to a circular argument. For example, if we observe Billy kissing a girl, we might ask why he is kissing a girl, to which someone might respond because he is heterosexual (explanatory fiction). We might then ask how we know that he is heterosexual (hypothetical construct), to which someone might respond, because he kisses a girl.

In the place of these reified abstractions, Williams et al. propose the ontological reality of human embodiment. They suggest that sexuality only makes sense when considered in terms of what embodied humans do, in other words, when it addresses human behavior (a concretization or instantiation) rather than human identity, orientation, or attraction (abstractions). This theory gives rise to agency or the "taking up" and "giving oneself over to" thoughts, feelings, ideas, circumstances, and more. In consequence, humans become fully responsible for their sexual behavior.

Although Williams et al. present a well-reasoned case for sexuality being fully agentic (i.e., the "taking on" and "giving over to" all aspects of sexuality), as LDS Christians, they face a sticky problem; that of reconciling their position on agentic sexuality with the Church. The Church officially and explicitly asserts that individuals may experience attractions that are not of their own making (i.e., not agentic). Elder Ballard stated, "Let us be clear: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believes that the experience of same-sex attraction is a complex reality for many people." He goes on to say, "Even though individuals *do not choose* to have such attractions, they do choose how to respond to them (Ballard, 2015, emphasis added). To be fair, Elder Ballard was not trying to present a cohesive theory of sexuality, nor did he identify the source of sexual attraction, but his statements are presented on the Church website under the topic of same-sex attraction, suggesting that they represent the Church's current official position. The Church leaves open the possibility that individuals may experience "forces that 'push' and 'pull'[them] to. . . feel certain things," for which they are not responsible because (i.e., they did not choose those feelings). And these forces may incline individuals toward certain sexual thoughts, feelings, desires, attractions, and behavior. As described by Elder Ballard, these forces do not seem to rise to the level of a "sexual identity", but they do suggest that not every aspect of a person's sexual experience is strictly agentic.

I commend Williams and his colleagues for taking on a difficult and potentially costly topic in an era where careful reasoning is often subjugated to social expedience and dissenting voices are expunged from public discourse. Heaven knows that the growing confusion around sex, sexuality, and sexual behavior is causing untold damage to individuals and societies. Consequently, there is a growing need to provide cohesive, lucid, and compelling explanations of sexuality and agency. I look forward to reading the authors future works on these topics.

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What Agentic Sexuality Is and What It Is Not

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Abstract

A brief rejoinder to the critical responses of Nelson, Erickson, and Sabey to our paper, "Embodied Moral Agency as Foundation: Human Sexuality as a Test Case."

We wish to sincerely thank the scholars who have taken the time to respond to our paper, "Embodied Moral Agency as Foundation: Human Sexuality as a Test Case" (this issue). The responses are thoughtful and help to focus attention on issues where our paper can be clearer. We appreciate the opportunity to respond to those issues and thereby refine and clarify the central ideas that we have presented. We are pleased to respond briefly to each reviewer.

Nelson, in "Illuminating the Untenable Nature of the 'Born That Way' Argument" (this issue), provides an important example of how the analysis developed in our paper can be applied to a substantive contemporary issue relevant to both research in psychology and related disciplines and the larger culture. The application is rendered clear by Professor Nelson's careful analysis of the empirical literature on the topic and his weaving of that analysis into his evaluation of the theoretical case that our paper makes for the centrality of agency in any comprehensive understanding of human behavior in general, and of human sexuality in particular. Our earnest hope is that our paper might motivate other works of the sort that Nelson offers here, and that such works might result in a new and more fruitful understanding of human sexuality, particularly in light of the truth available within the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We believe that the pairing of careful empirical work with intensive and exacting philosophical critique and analysis can be of immense benefit to contemporary psychological understandings of the nature of human sexuality and moral agency. We take it to be axiomatic that good, careful, and thoughtful theory can enhance the understanding of the meaning and import provided by empirical data. At the same time good, careful, thoughtful empirical study can reveal important things and help in evaluating theories. Ultimately, then, good theories simultaneously affect and benefit from carefully produced reliable empirical data. This symbiotic effect is beautifully exemplified in Nelson's review of our work.

We are similarly grateful for Erickson's (this issue) careful reading and insightful response to our paper; which, given the unconventional and non-traditional understanding of agency our paper offers, we realize is no small task. Erickson takes an important step in bringing the issue of agentic sexuality into the realm of lived experience and directs attention to the all-important "applied"

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realm where theoretical explication meets the understanding and behavior of real persons. Erickson takes up this most important set of questions by drawing on an article by Douglas Mainwaring, as well as some material produced by the North Star organization. In this short response, we will take the opportunity that Erickson's response offers to provide additional clarification of the important issues she raises.

As Erickson takes up particular examples of how agency and sexuality can be understood, such as those found in the narrative provided by Mainwaring, it is clear how difficult it can be to break from all the categories of thought and analysis that have developed from the dominant rationalist libertarian explications of free will and how such traditional categories shape and guide our contemporary cultural and professional understanding of the nature of human sexuality. For example, Erickson correctly notes that our paper does speak of the biological reality of our bodies and of the relentless demands the body places on us. Unfortunately, however, the nature of biological reality and its effects (i.e., "demands") is easily misunderstood. Indeed, a key argument of our paper is that this has largely been the case in modern culture and psychology—and it has been so to the ultimate detriment of our understanding of our own agency, not to mention our own sexuality.

In almost all areas of human endeavor, the "relentless demands" of our biological embodiment are quite clear and straightforward. For example, imagine Smith works as a carpenter; that is, being a carpenter is what Smith does in and with much of his life. Every day, Smith must confront the "relentless demands of embodiment," as it is repeatedly made clear that there are limits to how fast he can work, and how much he can carry at one time, and thus to the number of trips it takes to load and unload needed materials. He is continuously confronted by limitations of various sorts, such as the size and weight of certain tools, how such brute realities constrain how he will operate those tools, and what contrivances he will need in order to use them most effectively. He is also confronted by advantages and affordances because his more-than-six-foot frame allows him to reach some things and do some jobs others cannot. His physical stature also allows him to excuse himself from certain other jobs in small and tight spaces, tasks that he will gladly assign to others because they are things he is simply not capable of doing. However, at no time does it enter Smith's mind that any part of his physical make-up – including his DNA—could in any way make him or induce him to be a carpenter, or cause him to enjoy being a carpenter, or need being a carpenter for the establishment of his identity or even personal satisfaction. Indeed, how could the physical material of Smith's body know or care about, or do any of these sorts of things?

The case of physical reality and the "relentless" (because not subject to willful change) demands of the body (or, embodiment) in terms of sexuality is in some sense similar to the case of Smith's carpentry. In another sense, the bodily impact and import viz a viz sexuality is much simpler. The acute givenness—"relentless demands"—of the body in sexual matters are really quite simple and straightforward, and limited to some obvious realities. Every cell of the human body—except for blood cells—has the markers of biological sex. The biological/bodily demands on sexuality are the chromosomally indexed bodily sex, sexual apparatus, and secondary sex characteristics, along with biological correlates such as muscle mass, center of gravity, and other biological dimorphisms in various body parts. But, just as we likely would not assume that Smith's love and expression of carpentry or his identity as a carpenter could be deeply rooted in or caused by his biology, we ought to seriously ask ourselves on what basis we could suppose that the human, agentic expressions or experiences of "sexuality" are matters that biological substances could determine or influence, much less produce.

In other words, it is equally questionable just how the physical material of the body, or even a particular bit of physical material in the body, can produce any non-physical things such as "attractions," "feelings," "identities," or "preferences"—whether for carpentry or for sexuality. At the present time we are not familiar with any research on this possibility that is not—at its core—simply correlational; that is, when people are behaving in some sexually relevant way, their bodies and brains are not inert, bodies are (always) doing something. However, no causal arrows emerge

from such analyses, despite the fact that they are often (illegitimately) inferred. In a similar vein, as we might think to ask Smith whether he has ever felt that deep inside him there was a musician trying to "get out" and find expression. We suspect his answer might be something like, "I don't know. Maybe. I've thought about it. I used to hang around with friends who played instruments. I know I could do that if I wanted to. It would be a change in life. It would come at a cost. Would I really want that more than this? That's for me to choose, right?"

This answer from Smith—that we have constructed—illustrates the kind of being-in-the-world that is the domain of persons possessed of the sort of agency for which our paper argues. As we have argued, agency consists in doing, taking up, giving oneself over, taking on, and putting off, for countless, and often unarticulated reasons, which reasons are also, in turn, the fruit of genuine agentic acting. We note here that in our brief explanation, there has been no mention of, indeed no need for, any abstract entity like an "identity," an abstraction so often invoked and which indeed seems to dominate current thinking about sexuality, but which ultimately obviates the very existence and power of real human agency.

Now, none of the foregoing should be taken to suggest that the emotions, the "feelings" of persons as they are actively "taking up" or "taking on" various possibilities, various "what-if's" and "if-only's," that active agentive meaning-making persons experience in daily life, are not "real." The question is, rather, in what way they are "real." Certainly, they are real enough in the sense that something is being experienced; the person experiencing such feelings is neither lying about them nor just "making things up." However, and this is the crux of any truly agentic account, while such (sexual) feelings and desires are really taking place, it most certainly does not follow that such feelings are necessarily what they present themselves to be, either in substance or in origin, even while the agent doing the "feeling" is really experiencing them.[1] On the contrary, the agent is not simply "feeling," but in many subtle and continuous ways "creating," or, in other words, "living." Of course, we are most often unaware of the creative, constructive activities involved in thinking, doing, or feeling at the heart of our actions. This is because in nearly all aspects and situations of life, we simply do not take the time to stop, introspect, and make explicit to ourselves in some formal or theoretical way what, why, and how exactly we are doing and feeling what we are doing and feeling. Indeed, doing so often seems unnecessary, and would in fact tend to make all acting profoundly slow, artificial, and clumsy—not to mention people mostly lack any language suitable to such a subtle and boundless identification and specification task. This is to say that this agentic productive process is largely unnoticed because it exists—not on display as in a museum, or in a form that might be readily captured by an X-Ray or fMRI image—but only in and through the actual agentic act of doing and feeling.

Asking us to give abstracted, analytical descriptions of what it is like to feel sexually attracted is rather like asking a fish what it is like to breathe by means of gills instead of lungs. Being sexually attracted is just what we do in many ways that are constantly coming and going, shifting and growing, or frightening and demanding—as we actively live our lives moment to moment, in and through the flow of daily engagement with the world and others. There really is no "time-out" in agentic life—just ever-shifting meaningful contexts co-constituted by us and all the others who happen to be relevant to us in our ongoing-lives, for whatever combination of shifting, ebbing, and flowing reasons. So, the conclusion here is that sexual feelings are real enough (all life is real enough), but this is not to say that they are what they proclaim themselves to be or what we, ourselves, or others take them to be, at any one moment in the flow of any agent's lived world. Even less can we claim such feelings to really be what extraspective analysts, scholars, or professionals might claim them to be.

Finally, Sabey's (this issue) thoughtful re-

[1] The possibility of self-deception in the agentic "doing" of particular feelings that is raised here is a psychologically and philosophically pressing question, but one which unfortunately exceeds the scope of this short response paper and will require more attentive treatment at another time. The interested reader, however, may benefit from consulting discussions of the issue of self-deception, agency, and emotion explored in Williams and Gantt (2012), Williams (2005), and Warner (1986b,a).

sponse raises several important questions that provide us an opportunity to clarify some additional aspects of what we mean in depicting human sexuality as agentive acting. The first issue is raised in the first paragraph of Sabey's response, where he discusses the importance of sexuality in such contexts as those where "limitations of religious institutions' ability to discriminate based on issues of sex and sexuality continues to be challenged." The issue of discrimination raised here most certainly is not the simple and inevitable truism that people, as well as organizations such as churches, can and do "tell the difference" between things or types of things (i.e., discriminate them from other things). Life, without discrimination of this sort, would be dangerous indeed. Obviously, rather, what Sabey is referring to is mistreatment or unfairness toward people because of something they are—categorically or even metaphysically—through no action of their own. The analysis of sexuality presented in our paper, however, argues that sexuality is not an attribute of persons – categorically or metaphysically—but, rather, sexuality is agentic action undertaken by moral agents in ways and for reasons that may be quite opaque in the course of daily involvement in the world to the actors themselves or to observers of the action. Thus, it would be unreasonable for a church to discriminate—i.e., deal with people differently—"based on issues of sex and sexuality" were these indeed non-agentic things that simply befall people because of factors and forces in the face of which persons are either ignorant or helpless. That is, differential treatment would be problematic were sexuality just something that happens to persons. However, on the other hand, it would be entirely reasonable to deal with people differently based on what they, as moral agents, do by virtue of their intrinsic agency. Indeed, it might be argued that the purpose of religion is to caution against some courses of action and ways of going through life, courses of action that agents might take up, or give themselves over to, which lead to outcomes not to be desired, as well as recommending other courses of action that lead to where believers want to go (or, qua believers, where they should want to go). While this is "discrimination" in the broad descriptive sense, it is hardly discrimination in the negative, persecutorial sense, even though such "discrimination" might be taken to be or pervasively claimed to be persecutorial, even by other believers, in our current cultural discourse. Indeed, it would seem that a central defining function of any faith tradition is to lay out for all believers the beatific vision of what any adherent should want to do and want to be—otherwise, there would be no purpose for a faith tradition beyond providing the hedonic affirmations that any secular psychotherapy might also offer.

Sabey catches the essence of our analysis of sexuality when he points out that the theories of contemporary psychology "do not allow humans to be responsible for their sexuality or sexual behavior." This is indeed a fundamental part of our argument. However, we will here seize on the opportunity to remind the reader of how deep the analysis goes by noting that the wording of the above quote from Sabey's paper regarding people's "being responsible for . . . their sexuality or sexual behavior" seems to make a distinction between "sexuality" and "sexual behavior," a distinction our argument calls into question. Ultimately, although for rhetorical convenience we can use both "sexuality" and "sexual behavior" in their descriptive senses, analytically, the perspective we offer in our paper argues against reifying any abstraction (e.g., sexuality) and thus emphasizes that sexuality and (agentic) sexual behavior are always the same thing.

Sabey is clear and insightful in his description of how the mainstream discipline has handled human sexuality noting that, failing to develop a coherent account of human sexuality, "modern psychology (wittingly or not) seems to have largely defaulted to an al la carte approach, choosing theories that, under the specific circumstances, best suit an agenda of human blamelessness." Indeed, this problem is chief among those our paper seeks to address.

Sabey further expresses a very substantive issue, one about which we care deeply. This is the question of whether the analysis of sexuality we offer is in some way at odds with how prophets, apostles, and other leaders in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have spoken about sexual experiences and attractions. We appreciate this thoughtful critique as it gives us opportunity to respond to such concerns directly. Sabey

writes: "The Church officially and explicitly asserts that individuals may experience attractions that are not of their own making (i.e., not agentic)." It is important to note here that, at least in the official writings of the Church of which we are aware, the parenthetical comment "(not agentic)" is not part of the text. We would hope our paper makes clear that we disagree not only with any naturalistic or psychic view of determinism that eliminates the possibility of human agency in its account of human behavior, but also disagree with the understanding of human agency cast in the language of classical rational libertarian free choice. To say that people experience attractions not of their own making seems to agree with one of the fundamental assumptions of our paper. Of course, we do not purposely and deliberatively "make" our own experiences. As we argue in our paper, agents are most often "blind" to the source and origin of most of what they do—even agentically do – unless significant critical self-reflection is undertaken in or after the doing of it. The traditional libertarian view of agency, what is often called the "radical choice" approach to human freedom (see, e.g., Taylor, 1985), argues that the hallmark of agency is the making of deliberated "free" choices from among sets of (presumably equally viable) alternatives. However, such is almost never actually the case in actual human action and choosing. Rather, agency, as our paper seeks to understand it, consists in a much more pervasive, dynamic, holistic, and intricate engagement in and with the world and with others. Indeed, our agency is so much a part of us that we seldom stop to deliberate about it at all. Thus, we agree with Elder Ballard, whom Sabey cites, in that we do not believe that sexually relevant feelings or experiences of any sort generally arise from, or result from, deliberated choices from amongst equally attractive and possible alternatives in the way that our post-Enlightenment, rational cultures might have supposed that all agentic acts must emerge. We simply cannot and do not conjure experiences—at least, not genuine experiences. For example, it is impossible to "be angry," or "be attracted," on demand or for no grounding reason. Rather, agency is so much woven into the fabric, both warp and woof, of life itself that we, for the most part, lose all sense of deliberate choosing and indeed do not "have" genuine experiences of our own deliberate making – except as we sometimes distance ourselves from the flow of life for some limited analytical purposes, or perhaps, to test the maxim, "fake it 'til you make it."

To pursue the issue further, the kind of "choosing" that constitutes agentic action, in the flow of a real life always already underway, must be something akin to the constant "choosing" of, for example, the point of articulation, the position of the tongue, engagement or non-engagement of the vocal cords, and the expulsion of air from different places in our vocal system every time we speak. Speaking is inherently agentic—unless one is under the influence of chemical substances or otherwise impaired—but it is not deliberatively or radically freely "chosen" in the way that libertarian accounts of human action typically describe human agency. Indeed, if a speaker were to stop to make these actions of articulation matters of deliberation, he or she would almost certainly experience grave difficulty in speaking with any fluency at all. Thus, we hold that we are in agreement with Elder Ballard and even hope that our view of agency might help people understand what we believe he is teaching. Things like attractions, even while they are agentic, are much more dynamic and subtle than can ever be understood by any conception of libertarian rational choice.

Sabey further quotes Elder Ballard, who stated, "Let us be clear: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believes that the experience of same-sex attraction is a complex reality for many people." Here again we agree with Elder Ballard. We hold that people "do not choose to have . . . attractions," firstly because, as Sabey correctly argues in his commentary, "attractions" as abstractions are empty concepts, and not at all the sorts of things a person could actually "have" in the common sense of that word. As abstractions, attractions are not real "things" that one can choose. In our view, an "attraction" is a description of how one is currently agentically "being-in-the-world." That is, attractions are not things that "call" us or "drive us," but, rather, in any moment, they are always already what we are doing. To be sure, we can do more – which would be doing the "attraction" more broadly and overtly, but, even

then, only by "acting attractedly," acting as we, without really deliberating or consciously choosing to do so, suppose an attracted person would act. Nonetheless, since our attractions, our sexual "desirings," are accoutrements of what else we as agents are doing, then we as agents must keep doing certain things or the attractions will cease to be—that is, they will, as we might say, "go away" (as all actions do when we cease doing them—this is why, for example, repentance works). In the end, this is all to say that agents can, at all times, in hundreds of ways, and for hundreds of reasons, do and be otherwise. Perhaps not easily in every case, or even most cases, but nonetheless the possibility still persists, and it does so only by virtue of our fundamental nature as moral agents. We are so confident that doing otherwise is always possible because to be the kind of beings we are is to be doing something—so doing otherwise is always a sort of "sideways" move, not a "starting from scratch."

The position we wish to articulate and defend in our paper is one in which this ongoing, dynamic, enmeshed agentic doing constitutes the very substance of agentic life and a particular type of choosing.[2] In 2 Nephi 2:27, we read of "choosing" in a way that looks very much like what we are proposing in our conceptualization of human agency:

> Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death.

Certainly, a choice of the sort described in this passage of scripture (i.e., a choice of eternal life) is not the sort of thing one does one day on a whim or for some calculated reason arrived at through the detached deliberation of any cost/benefit ratios. The sort of "choosing" depicted here is simply too comprehensive and too grand for that sort of thing. Such a choice (eternal life or captivity and death) can be nothing short of the creative result of an entire life of agentic taking up and giving of ourselves over to various meaningful, lived possibilities and relationships. We believe Elder Ballard is absolutely correct in his analysis, and more importantly we would hope that he would judge us to be in agreement with him.

We believe the Church has wisely left further analysis of the "pushes and pulls" that sometimes seem to be a part of our lives, including sexually relevant actions, for church members to work through, thereby avoiding what would surely be taken to be theological pronouncements of the metaphysics of sin and worthiness. Surely, the Church has no desire to offend or discourage—with some philosophical or metaphysical pronouncement—any member who might actually be helped at any moment for any number of reasons, by any number of invitations by the loving grace of Jesus and helping words and helping hands. The Church, we believe, would not want any sort of theological or philosophical perspective to get in anyone's way or to interfere with the genuine agency which offers the continual promise of a possible "otherwise." Nonetheless, we hardly believe that something the Church "leaves open" can rise to the level of a refutation, much less a contradiction, of the view of agency we have sought to articulate. The only way the Church's statements referenced by Sabey could constitute a refutation of our view of agency would be if one were to reify abstractions (like "attractions") and endow them with real causal power, while accepting libertarian rational free choice as the true definition of human moral agency. However, to do that would be to adopt a position that Sabey himself seemed to appropriately refute earlier in his comments, and one that our paper was also intended to refute.

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[2]Not, we must be clear, the kind of objective, isolated, abstracted, deliberative choosing of the classical libertarian model of agency that has been so prominent in our traditions.

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Overcoming the Vice of Pornography: A Virtue Ethics Approach to Conceptualizing and Treating Compulsive Pornography Use for Latter-day Saint Therapists

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Abstract

Thoughtful critics have pointed out a number of conceptual and scientific problems inherent in the most prominent theory of compulsive pornography use, the so-called "disease" model. There is, however, concern that this model may not be adequately able to account for centrally important features of this distressing phenomenon. In this paper, we outline a virtue ethics approach to understanding and treating compulsive pornography use, behavior often explained by researchers and practitioners in terms of the Brain Disease Model of Addiction (BDMA). We argue that a virtue ethics perspective offers a viable alternative conceptual framework more fully able to account for the central features of compulsive pornography use and the experiences of those who struggle with it. In brief, the virtue ethics approach understands compulsive pornography use as a "vicious" habit, one countered by actively developing specific virtues through a repetitive, agentic process of forming a deeper, more holistic moral character and worldview—in particular, a worldview that relies on the grace of our Savior Jesus Christ. The therapeutic aim of virtuous character formation serves to redefine both the process and goals of addiction therapy, while also offering a more coherent conceptual framework within which many common therapeutic tools already in use can still have relevance.

***Keywords*:** Aristotle, addiction, pornography, brain disease model, Virtue Ethics, therapy, LDS therapy

Many researchers have devoted a great deal of time and effort to formulating a comprehensive and coherent account of compulsive pornography use (CPU; Blevins, 2016; Dunnington, 2011; Ley et al., 2014). Currently, the most widely accepted approach is known as the "disease" or "addiction" theory (Ley et al., 2014; Blevins, 2016). This approach, often referred to as the "brain disease model of addiction" (BDMA; Foddy, 2011), holds that CPU is the result of pathological patterns of neurochemical activity occurring in the brain, especially in the dopaminergic reward systems of the brain. It has been suggested that these neurochemical patterns of activity mirror those found in drug and alcohol addictions (see, e.g., Hilton, 2011).

Thoughtful critics have, however, pointed out several conceptual and scientific problems inher-

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ent in the BDMA (see, e.g., Dunnington, 2011; Heather et al., 2018; Overcash, 2021; Satel and Lilienfeld, 2013; Westin, 2020). As a result, many researchers and therapists seem to be searching for a better, more coherent and consistent, perspective from which to make sense of CPU, as well as a framework from which they can provide more effective and helpful interventions (Hall et al., 2015; Heather et al., 2022; Pickard, 2021; Pickard et al., 2015). Additionally, many seek an approach that takes seriously not only the doctrines and commandments concerning the divinely given gift of sexuality (e.g., the Law of Chastity), but also the healing grace proffered by the Savior to those willing to follow Him (see, e.g., Belzman, 2010; Cook, 2006; Dunnington, 2011; Timmons, 2012).

In this paper, we will outline an alternative approach to the BDMA inspired by Aristotelian virtue ethics, an alternative we believe can provide a more coherent and appropriate framework for understanding and treating CPU. It is important to note here, at the outset, that virtue is not to be understood simply as chastity or modesty, which is how it often ends up being defined in Latter-day Saint (LDS) vernacular and culture. Rather, virtue is defined as *moral excellence* in general, or excellence of character. In other words, virtue refers to all attributes of character that are integral to being an excellent person (e.g., friendship, prudence, intentionality, etc.), not merely to chastity.

It should also be noted that the term "ethics" is not to be understood as referring to the professional codes of conduct to which therapists must adhere as part of their professional obligations. Ethics is, rather, that branch of philosophical inquiry that seeks to understand how people should behave (i.e., what is considered right and wrong behavior and/or intention). Whereas general ethics is the broad focus on what is considered right and wrong behavior, virtue ethics is focused on systematically identifying what kind of person one should aspire to be (i.e., what character attributes should be acquired through development of virtuous habits) in order to attain moral excellence, live "the good life," and experience human flourishing.

As such, the virtue ethics framework we will present here puts CPU in a conceptual category that accounts for the insights of the more mainstream model of addiction currently in use but avoids the various pitfalls inherent in that approach. The conceptual category to which we refer is *habit*. To accomplish our aim, we will first articulate a few key features of an LDS conception of personhood that are relevant to understanding agency, character, and the possibility of meaningful healing and change. We will also articulate the central and defining features of CPU, in order to provide a clear conceptual foundation from which we can critically compare and contrast the virtue ethics model with the mainstream model of CPU. Second, we will summarize the mainstream model of CPU and briefly review some critiques thereof. Third, we will present a virtue ethics approach and demonstrate how such an approach offers a viable alternative conceptual and practical framework that more fully accounts for the central features of CPU and is more consistent with an LDS conception of personhood.

In a virtue ethics approach, compulsive pornography use reflects a sub-category of habit (i.e., it is a vice). Accordingly, CPU is seen as a "vicious" habit, in which clients are caught up in a particular mode of living (and, as will be argued further, self-understanding) in which they have oriented the habits of their lives such that CPU plays a central role. As part of our discussion we will show how the virtue ethics approach offers a more coherent framework within which many of the therapeutic interventions already in use still have some relevance, such that clinicians do not have to entirely change their approach, even though their understanding of the nature of the problems being addressed in therapy, and the goals they may set for therapy, may well be different. In short, we will show how redefining CPU as a vicious habit, and recovery in terms of the development of virtuous habits, could breathe new life, energy, and hope into our clients' efforts in therapy because their recovery will have the more hope-filled end-goal of becoming holier and developing stronger character, a goal that makes little sense in the mainstream model.

Key Features of the LDS Conception of Personhood

Intrinsic to LDS doctrine and scripture is a particular conception of personhood (see, e.g., 2 Nephi 2; Mosiah 3:19; Abraham 3:22-25; D&C 14:7; Moses 1:3-4, 13, 30-39)—a conception which must be preserved and defended in any model of CPU that LDS therapists are willing to take seriously. Although there are many aspects of the LDS conception of personhood which could be explored, we will briefly discuss only three aspects that we consider most relevant to our analysis and to the model of CPU we are proposing.

First and foremost, LDS teachings concerning the nature of personhood make the foundational claim that *human beings are moral agents capable of acting,* and as such are distinguished from things which are acted upon (2 Nephi 2:14; D&C 93:30-31; see also Williams, 2005; Williams and Gantt, 2020). In other words, human beings are by nature the sorts of beings who make choices and do things of themselves rather than the sorts of beings who simply react out of causal necessity as dictated by some antecedent force or process (e.g., environmental stimuli, id impulses, genetics, etc.). Because human actions are not caused or determined in the same way that the actions of natural objects are, humans have the possibility of being or doing otherwise in given situations, chosen from among possible alternatives of how to act. In short, moral agency implies that human nature is rooted in possibility.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that agency is not best understood as the ability to make free, unfettered choices through some process of conscious deliberation about options from moment to moment in what some scholars have called the "radical choice" model of agency (Taylor, 1999) – a conception of human agency in which the individual is said to possess the power to autonomously choose from amongst alternatives independent of the constraints of context or causality of any sort (see Williams and Gantt, 2022, for a more detailed treatment of this issue). Rather, descriptions of human agency in scripture depict people as having their hearts become fully set upon loving certain acts and things such that they start living in ways focused on the pursuit of those things they love. The Savior Himself has stated that "no man can serve two masters" (3 Nephi 13:24), suggesting that human agency is at least in part about coming to love God or love other things over time, not just about people choosing to follow or reject certain enticements in each given moment. Arising from this example is a morally dichotomous facet of human agency—a choice between a path of conversion to God's ways, or a path of entrapment and ensnarement that leads away from God (2 Nephi 10:23), and in which "hearts are set so much upon the things of this world" (D&C 121:35).

Thus, the second feature of personhood is that *by virtue of their agency, people can set their hearts on certain paths and come to love that which they pursue.* In biblical terms, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6: 19-21). In short, people's hearts can become habituated to pursue certain goals or activities, whether those goals are in-line with God's ways or against them (i.e., sin).

Mercifully, just because people can have their hearts set on sin does not mean their hearts must be permanently stuck seeking after sin. LDS theology teaches that "the Spirit of the Lord work[s] upon… the very vilest of sinners" (Mosiah 28:4), such that through repentance, laboring "without ceasing" (Alma 36:24), and the Atonement of Christ, all mankind can be redeemed, and people can have a "mighty change in... [their] hearts, that [they] have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2). More simply put—central to an LDS conception of personhood is the third feature: *all people are capable of change and repentance* through faith and diligence on the Lord's name. So, even though someone has become set in sinful ways, there is always hope that they can be healed and that their very natures can be changed. Caution must be taken, however, that we do not put the onus of change and transformation entirely on the person. As we show forth a willingness to develop new habits, Christ is the one who changes us, our hearts, and our desires, and new habits unfold in that process.

In summary, the LDS conception of personhood describes people as moral agents who can be enticed by, yield to, and can take up pursue particular paths and goals (Williams and Gantt, 2020). As people pursue various path of meaning over

time, their hearts can become habitually set upon those paths and the goals to which those paths are meant to lead them. However, people who find themselves on sinful paths are capable of change, and their very hearts and natures can be healed and transformed through faith and diligence on the gospel path and trusting in the Savior's promises to redeem them. For clinicians of the LDS faith, we believe this depiction of personhood must be foundational to any model of CPU. As we will argue, we believe the virtue ethics model is much more consistent with the LDS conception of personhood than the mainstream model we will describe.

Defining Features of CPU

We recognize that the experience of CPU is, in many ways, unique to each person. At the same time, there do seem to be some central features, common across all experiences of CPU, that unite the experiences of those who struggle with it. Those features help define, at least in part, what CPU is as a phenomenon. We believe that in addition to remaining consistent with an LDS conception of personhood, an adequate model of CPU must also account for its defining features.

First, the central and defining feature of CPU is compulsive behavior, which occurs even when people "are rationally convinced [that] they should not" (Dunnington, 2011, 57) seek after pornographic material. Second, for people struggling with CPU, their behavior is often morally, and sometimes spiritually, salient and distressing to them (Charati et al., 2020). Furthermore, such people often experience their compulsive use as a loss of freedom, with *addiction* being their primary way of both interpreting what is happening to them and understanding themselves (e.g., "I am a porn addict"; Blevins, 2016; Schalow, 2017; Westin, 2020).

Yet, even as they feel a loss of freedom in the face of their increasing pornography use, such people still seem to feel responsible for their actions and will often still refer to themselves as having willpower (Charati et al., 2020). In other words, it seems that people who struggle with CPU paradoxically experience their behavior as something largely out of their control and happening to them and, at the same time, assume responsibility for such behavior and for their efforts to stop their use. In short, CPU comes to play a very central role in the narrative of a person's moral life—it is a meaningful moral problem for which they feel responsible.

The Brain Disease Model of Addiction

Now that several relevant features of an LDS conception of personhood have been presented, and the central phenomenological features of CPU have been defined, we can safely move forward with a critical analysis of the dominant model of addiction (BDMA) and its relation to mainstream conceptualizations of CPU. The following questions will guide our analysis: (1) Is the BDMA approach to CPU rationally coherent? (2) Does it adequately account for the defining phenomenological features of CPU? (3) And, finally, is it consistent with an LDS conception of personhood?

The Brain Disease Model

Much research and theory in psychology on the nature and source of human suffering is founded on a view of personhood that largely attributes human suffering to pathological conditions or diseases (Foddy, 2011). Accordingly, the most common model of CPU is the BDMA. In this model, all psychological symptoms, emotional difficulties, and overall suffering that would bring clients to therapy (including CPU) are thought to be, ultimately, the result of biological mechanisms in the brain (Dunnington, 2011; Foddy, 2011; Slife and Hopkins, 2005; Westin, 2020).

With regards to the specific brain structures involved in CPU, the BDMA asserts that the compulsion to look at pornography arises when the reward centers of the brain are activated, or overactivated, and thus increase dopaminergic activity (i.e., the releasing of dopamine; Chamberlain et al., 2005). It is then argued that oxytocin and several other neurochemicals drive people to create an emotional bond with the dopamine-induced pleasurable feelings elicited by pornography viewing, causing them to repeatedly return to viewing and creating a pattern of compulsive use to which the person is addicted (Hilton, 2011).

For those that endorse the BDMA, then, people with CPU suffer from a neuropathology resulting from changed brain structures and functions that systematically cause them to seek out the

pleasure of *bonding* with the images of pornography (Hilton, 2011). It is in this sense that addiction is often thought of as "hijacking" the brain because such addiction is presumed to be taking control of the brain's natural reward systems (Teresi and Haroutunian, 2011). In sum, the BDMA asserts that the primary mechanism(s) necessarily driving CPU is rooted in brain physiology and claims that CPU is a biological/medical disease in need of medically focused treatment such as pharmacological intervention or treatment in a medicalized context (e.g., a hospital).

Analysis of the Brain Disease Model

In critique of the BDMA, we will first present the scientific evidence against the model, and then the philosophical objections to it. The BDMA has been rejected by many scientists for various reasons (see, e.g., Heather et al., 2022; Heyman, 2010, 2017; Lewis, 2015, 2018). One reason is that there are several neural changes typically associated with substance addictions that have not been observed in studies of pornography addiction, such as unique "long-term changes in the neural circuits involving dopamine, glutamate, and GABA," (Ley et al., 2014, 96) or other changes in neural circuitry that would account for the compulsive craving of pornography, as opposed to simply liking to view pornography much like how one would "like" any other kind of activity (Ley et al., 2014). The brainwave patterns observed in pornography addiction are also not consistent with those observed in other addictive behaviors, especially drug abuse (Blevins, 2016). In other words, CPU does not seem to be neurologically consistent with substance addictions that have long been thought of as brain diseases (Blevins, 2016; Ley et al., 2014).

Moreover, some have even argued that the status of addiction in general as a brain disease is not empirically supported because data on addiction treatment and recovery shows some individuals recovering from addictions independent of any physiological or pharmacological treatment in a medicalized context (Dunnington, 2011; Overcash, 2021; Westin, 2020). Furthermore, some have questioned why, if CPU truly is a brain disease, we have not developed pills, neurological surgeries, or other medical procedures to fix it, much like we have done for other diseases and psychological illnesses assumed to be based in brain activity (Dunnington, 2011; Westin, 2020).

Even if there was no scientific evidence against the BDMA, there are philosophical critiques of the model that undermine its validity or, at the very least, help to point out its inherent problems. We can first start by taking a closer look at one foundational philosophical assumption of the BDMA: biological determinism (Dunnington, 2011; Foddy, 2011; Gantt, 2002; Slife and Hopkins, 2005; Slife and Williams, 1995). Biological determinism is the notion that all human behavior is the necessary result of antecedent, causal biological forces. In other words, given the presence of certain causal biological conditions, A, B, and C, a particular behavior, D, must necessarily occur and cannot occur otherwise than it does, given those antecedent conditions. It is clear that the BDMA, as previously described, assumes biological determinism because it posits that, given certain neurobiological conditions (i.e., dopaminergic activity and hormonal bonding, etc.), CPU must necessarily occur and cannot occur otherwise than it does given those antecedent conditions. In other words, the brain has been hijacked, presumably causing the person to compulsively seek after pornography.

There is at least one central problem with the BDMA and its assumption of biological determinism, however. In order for proponents of the BDMA to validate their assumption of biological determinism, they must first prove that changes in the brain do in fact cause human actions to change and can cause pathological compulsivity that is distinctly different from human actions not considered compulsive, involuntary, or diseased. However, as Overcash (2021) points out, empirically speaking, "change is fundamental to brain. This phenomenon is known as neuroplasticity—the ability of the brain's neurons to reorganize themselves in response to stimuli" (p. 57). So, "in order to argue that the addiction-related neurobiological states are pathological, then, disease-model proponents must do more than simply point to evidence that addiction changes the brain" (Overcash, 2021, 57). In other words, simply pointing out that the brain changes and that neurochemicals fluctuate dif-

ferently when a person is consistently viewing pornography is insufficient to support the argument that such changes *cause* compulsive viewing because change in neurobiological activity is a starting assumption for all human action, both voluntary and involuntary (Dunnington, 2011).

Moreover, if we take the principle claims of biological determinism to be true, several problematic implications follow that serve to fundamentally undermine both the central phenomenological features of CPU and some key aspects of the LDS conception of personhood. To start, if biological determinism is true, then one fundamental aspect of agency—purposive, genuinely meaningful choice—and the ability to heal through some sense of that agency is undermined for at least two reasons. First, the BDMA presumes that healing can only occur by means of some manner of medical/biological intervention. However, as we have noted above, healing from addiction has been shown to occur without any such intervention taking place.

And second, even more importantly, if the thesis of determinism is true, then all human action is rendered intrinsically without meaning. In order for human actions to be genuinely meaningful there must be the possibility that we could have done otherwise than we do, otherwise our acting is simply something that happens to us, something that just happens as it must happen (for a more detailed analysis of this issue, see Williams and Gantt, 2020, 2022; Williams et al., 2021). In other words, there is no such thing as meaningful behavior if the acts persons engage in are the necessitated product of causal forces outside their active engagement and intentional participation (see Slife and Hopkins, 2005; Williams, 2005; Williams et al., 2021). However, this is precisely the logic, and the unavoidable implication of that logic, at work at the heart of the BDMA because of the biological determinism it presupposes.

Taking the logic of biological determinism even further, if its claims of necessity are true, then it follows that the actions of both the compulsive pornography user and the therapist are the necessarily determined products of underlying biological factors, processes, or conditions. In other words, biological determinism does not discriminate between compulsive pornography users and therapists when it comes to accounting for the source of behavior because it is presumed that *all* human behavior is biologically determined. This implication necessarily leads to two additional worrisome conclusions. First, the imputation of any genuine or sustainable moral significance to human action becomes impossible. For legitimate moral distinctions to be made regarding the praiseworthiness or blameworthiness, the rightness or wrongness, of a given action, there must be the possibility for the actor to do otherwise than they have done, and to be aware of alternative possibilities and distinctions in the first place.

However, if all human behavior (including thoughts and feelings) are necessarily determined such that they cannot be otherwise than they are necessitated to be, then any such moral distinctions and possibilities do not in fact exist. Rather, biological determinism entails that we are only aware of and thinking about what we are necessarily determined to be aware of and thinking about, and, thus, we cannot be aware of, think about, or do anything other than what has been dictated for us by the biological conditions that constitute the causal antecedents of our thoughts and actions. Behavior, on this reductive and deterministic view, can be neither genuinely moral and praiseworthy nor immoral and blameworthy. Rather, behavior simply is what it is, a-meaningful and, thus, non-moral.

In short, if the BDMA, rooted in the reductive assumption of biological determinism, is true, then meaning, agency, the possibility of genuine transformative change, and morality are all undermined. This, in turn, means that the disease model of CPU cannot adequately account for the central features of CPU (i.e., morally salient, involving willpower, and being meaningful to the person) and that it is in direct conflict with several key aspects of an LDS conception of personhood (i.e., moral agency and the possibility of genuinely transformative change). This is not to say that the model does not reflect any features of CPU—it does acknowledge compulsivity, after all. Indeed, as Dunnington (2011) notes, "This is, *functionally* [sic], why the disease model of addiction has been helpful to many people with ad-

dictions. It resonates with the addicted person's experience" (Dunnington, 2011, 35). However, the BDMA still falls short of being able to deliver on the promise of including all phenomenological features of CPU and being consistent with an LDS conception of personhood.

The Virtue Ethics Approach

We will devote the remainder of this paper to outlining an alternative approach to both conceptualizing and treating CPU, an approach that draws inspiration from Aristotelian virtue ethics and is more consistent with both an LDS conception of personhood and the phenomenological features of CPU. We will begin by examining the virtue ethics conception of personhood, how that conception makes sense of human action, and how an LDS understanding of personhood dovetails with the virtue ethics framework. We will then seek to account for CPU using the virtue ethics framework, and then conclude with an exploration of the clinical implications (and applications) of such an approach.

Because Aristotle's philosophical work constitutes such a large corpus of writings, with many subtle nuances in logic and a multiplicity of topics and subtopics, for the sake of this brief analysis, we will present only the most relevant concepts in as simple a form as we can to increase their accessibility, recognizing that what we present is only a small part of what Aristotle, and later figures such as St. Thomas Aquinas, have to offer the discipline of psychology.

Conception of Personhood

On the opening page of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle begins his analysis by stating: "Every art and every investigation, and similarly every action and pursuit, is considered to aim at some good. Hence the good has been rightly defined as 'that at which all things aim"' (Aristotle, 2004, Book 1, 1094a, 1-3). Here, Aristotle begins his account of ethics (i.e., the nature of the good life and how to achieve it) by asserting a central and foundational feature of the nature of personhood: *All human action is purposively directed toward the pursuit of some aim or goal, which aims are referred to as goods*. In other words, it is the fundamental nature of human beings to be the sort of beings that can and do act purposively towards the achievement of some end, some of which are uniquely human goods, such as "friendship, belonging, justice, social order, and knowledge" (Fowers et al., 2017). So, here at the ground level of understanding human nature from a virtue ethics approach, we have a view that is already harmonious with the conception of personhood articulated in the doctrines and teachings of the Restored Gospel: Human beings are the sorts of beings who act, with purpose, in a fundamentally moral context of relative goods.

"Aristotle's thinking [about human nature] is teleological (from the Greek words, *telos* meaning 'goal' and *logos* meaning 'knowledge'). This means that he understands [people] in terms of the goals that they pursue" (van Hooft, 2006, 51). In contrast, then, to the more reflexively reactive and mechanical accounts of human behavior so common in contemporary psychological science, the Aristotelian view is one in which human beings are seen first to be purposive actors situated in a world of moral distinctions, enticements, and possibilities.

With that grounding assumption of purposive action in place, we find in Aristotle's writings three other central characteristics of human nature. The first characteristic (often considered to be one of the most important characteristics grounding virtue ethics) is that human beings are fundamentally relational, social beings (Fowers et al., 2017; van Hooft, 2006). Indeed, Aristotle famously stated that "Man is by nature a social being" (Aristotle, 2004, Book 1, 1097b, 11). As we will explore in more depth later, virtue ethics assumes that part of what makes certain goals more worthy of pursuit than others is that those goals are related to our fundamentally social nature. For Aristotle, "close attachments to others are essential for living well" (Fowers et al., 2017, 23), and "one of the clearest ways to see the importance of social bonds is to pay attention to what happens when they are disrupted, lost, or absent" (Fowers et al., 2017, 25).

Additionally, a virtue ethics approach takes human sociality to be central because all human actions and purposes take place within "social realities" (van Hooft, 2006, 50) that help to shape our understanding of which goals are most worthwhile and which are not, and "the more we learn

about the importance of attachment and belonging, the more obvious it becomes that the [idea] of the separate, sufficient individual is just plain false for human beings" (Fowers et al., 2017, 27). In short, human beings are fundamentally relational beings, acting out of particular aspirations in a morally saturated and meaningful social world.

Another central doctrine of human nature in the Aristotelian view is that human beings are rational beings. As van Hooft (2006) notes, "the activities [i.e., goal-directed purposive actions] that are distinctly human are rational activities" (van Hooft, 2006, 50). Accordingly, human beings are "not social in the way that herd or flock or swarm animals are... because we are also rational creatures" (Fowers et al., 2017, 28). In other words, a fundamental feature of human nature is that we are the sorts of beings who can find and generate reasons for our actions. To be human is to be able to aspire to certain ends, as well as to be able to offer accounts of the worthiness or unworthiness of those ends. We can create and find meaning in the actions we take and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We can deliberate on justifications for our actions to make sense of them to ourselves and others. As such, virtue ethics assumes that humans are beings endowed with reason, acting for reasons, and capable of reasoning together with other such beings.

Third, in connection with the previously mentioned characteristics, Aristotelian virtue ethics maintains that human beings are not only aware of the kinds of choices they can make but are also *morally sensitive* to the quality of their choices and actions. To be human is to be aware of and able to consider the moral worth and moral consequences of one's actions, and to be called by our nature to aspire to certain distinctly human ends and to fulfill certain uniquely human purposes (Snyder, 2020; van Hooft, 2006). In short, humans are fundamentally moral beings. Virtue is not some sort of cultural "add-on," or the product of some manner of cognitive ascription serving solely individual purposes; rather, it is our very nature as the sorts of rational, purposive beings we are. Such moral sensitivity is manifest in some of the most important, and most human, questions that we so often ask ourselves: "How should we live well?"; "What is the right thing to do?"; "What is my duty to others?; and "Why is [an action] a good or worthwhile goal?" So, not only are human beings the sorts of beings who act purposively and are fundamentally social and rational, but we are also the sorts of beings who concern ourselves continually with the moral question "how should we act?"

This implies that there is something about being human that means we can evaluate our own motives, think about how best to achieve goals, consider which aspirations are choice-worthy and moral. And, as Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor Taylor (1999) points out, we are able to evaluate even our moral evaluations (i.e., judgements) and consider whether such evaluations themselves are moral (i.e., of the many desires we experience as human beings, which are worth desiring; of the many goals we could seek, which are worth seeking, etc.).

After understanding that human beings are intrinsically purposive and characteristically social, rational, and moral beings, Aristotle argues that we all ultimately live our lives in pursuit of what we envision (rightly or wrongly, virtuously or viciously) to be the *good life* (Fowers, 2005). In other words, we are all seeking out those goods that we see as most central to a worthwhile life, or a life that could be considered good, flourishing, fulfilling, and morally excellent. There are a great many goods and goals that human beings can pursue, and not everyone is pursuing the same goods. Rather, all are pursuing what they see as the best goods. As Fowers (2005) has said, "people act and fashion their lives as a whole through pursuit of what they see as worthwhile goals" (Fowers, 2005).

Some readers may assume at this point that a virtue ethics approach holds that *any* vision of the good life is a vision worth pursuing, implying that all visions of the good life (i.e., what is the best kind of life) are equal, which would be a form of moral relativism. It is important, however, to be clear that this is not at all the case. For Aristotle, there are some visions of the good life that can be considered a form of *living well*, and there are others that cannot be so considered. There is, Aristotle teaches, an intrinsic moral hierarchy in human action and human aspiration, a hierarchy by which we can judge the moral desirability and

worthiness of various ways of being, acting, desiring, relating, and living. In virtue ethics, "an unquestionably good life [is] one that expresses human nature in the best ways" (Fowers et al., 2017, 20).

That is, a truly good or virtuous life is one in which the person's intentions and conduct are in accord with and represent most fully those things that make human beings characteristically human in their best form. Living in those ways that embody the moral and practical excellence of human nature are just those ways in which human beings are capable of living a *flourishing* life, a life of genuine depth, richness, existential and moral significance, and in which the achievement of our potential *as* human beings is most fully realized. In other words, a truly flourishing life is one that consists of pursuing choice-worthy ends, for the right reasons, and in the right ways, as one strives to fulfill one's fundamental nature in light of what it means to be a human being. In sum, a flourishing life is, according to Aristotle, one in which we pursue all three aspects of an excellent life to the best of our ability, even though doing so can take time and require significant effort as one works to fully craft one's life in the pursuit of choice-worthy goals for the right reasons and in the right ways (Aristotle, 2004).

It is rather likely that most of us pursue a combination of both excellent and non-excellent visions of the good life. For example, it is generally considered a worthy goal to get a job and pursue some wealth in this life. However, a person could choose to get a job for poor (i.e., not virtuous) reasons, such as out of pride or greed, or they could seek to obtain a job in immoral ways, such as through lying and deceit. In contrast, one could seek out gainful employment, presumably with a reputable and honest employer, in order to be of service to others, to develop one's experience and character, to relieve the burden of supporting oneself from others, or any number of other virtuous reasons. A flourishing life is, according to Aristotle, one in which we persistently and intentionally strive to fully craft our lives in the pursuit of choice-worthy goals for the right reasons and in the right ways (Aristotle, 2004).

Notice that the conception of personhood at play in the virtue ethics perspective entails a good deal of flexibility regarding the many goals that can be seen as worthwhile and emblematic of a genuinely flourishing life. That is, while someone could choose to pursue the goal of being a teacher, another a therapist, and another an engineer or a dancer, the important consideration is always the ways in which, and the reasons for which, they seek to do what they do, to be who they seek to be. There is, thus, always a constraint on what kinds of lives are considered genuinely virtuous, a constraint rooted in a recognition of what it is in our nature that makes us uniquely human and uniquely capable of living virtuous lives.

Making Sense of Human Behavior

The virtue ethics vision of the flourishing human life provides a lens by which we can make sense of and understand the behavior and intentions of human beings in a fuller, more dynamic, as well as intrinsically moral, context. In order to understand why a person acts the way he or she does, one first needs to understand what their vision of the good life is (Titus, 2016); that is, what goods are they pursuing, for what reasons, and in what ways. A person's vision of the good life, whether fully articulated to themselves or not, is nonetheless discernable in and manifested by their actions (Fowers, 2005; van Hooft, 2006). A person's actions are fashioned after those goals and plans which they have chosen as ways to pursue their vision or understanding of what goods are ultimately worth pursuing.

Aristotle argues that the pursuit and achievement of genuinely human goods requires that we develop certain intellectual and character traits or attributes. These attributes are known as *virtues*. As Fowers et al. (2017) note, "Virtues are the capacities that make it possible to pursue human goods. . . . with excellence" (Fowers et al., 2017). This means that virtues are those characteristics a person can come to possess through intentional (and, often, intensive) work and habituation, and which allow a person to function well in pursuit of a good and flourishing life. Often, the virtues are referred to as personal strengths or the developed abilities and habits that allow a person to achieve the goals they choose.

It is important to remember, though, that virtues are not instrumental means for achieving

other, perhaps only individual, goals. Rather, a virtue is a way of life—a way of living and realizing the good life. Thus, virtues are both ends and means. They are those ways of being that are worth pursuing and doing because they are good in themselves. Many people are familiar with virtues such as gratitude, honesty, patience, integrity, courage, diligence, temperance, and gentleness. Most members of the Church would be more familiar with the terminology of *Christlike Attributes*, which describes some of the virtues that those who seek after the kingdom of God should develop as they strive to become more like Christ (see, e.g., *Preach My Gospel*, Chap. 6).

A virtuous person, then, is someone who exemplifies the best type of person that a human being can become, manifesting it both in their genuine desire and their developed ability to act in the ways that their worthy goals and circumstances require. The virtuous person, Aristotle shows, is the person who has developed the ability to exercise good judgment, but such judgment is not to be understood as the mere application of a rule. Rather, the virtuous person is someone who knows the right thing to do in the right way at the right time in regard to the right person(s).

The more a person practices virtue and learns to act in the right ways in the pursuit of certain goods, the more the actions that define that pursuit become habitual, "second nature", or a matter of character (Dunnington, 2011, 68), and thereby reveal both the fundamental nature of human beings as purposive, rational, moral, and social beings and the potential for nobility inherent in all of us (Stichter, 2018). In other words, the behaviors we consistently choose are those that become more and more habitual. As we consistently pursue a sustained vision of the good life and as we develop the virtues and other attributes that allow us to pursue that vision (Dunnington, 2011), those virtues come to define our character or comprise who we are and what we stand for. Indeed, the repeated practice of virtues such that they become our habitual ways of being, thinking, and feeling is not unlike the development of particular skills that over time become precise, natural, and easy to perform (Stichter, 2018). Of course, the same process can work in exactly the opposite direction as we choose to engage in or repeatedly practice vice, and, thereby, come to develop ignoble or inhuman habits and character. We shall have more to say about this issue in a later section.

In regards to compulsive pornography users, Westin (2020) has noted that their CPU often takes on a certain meaning to them, a meaning that often comes to permeate the whole of how they see and understand themselves. For example, compulsive users often label themselves as "addicts," which serves as an expression of the meaning that their compulsive use has in their lives. In a similar fashion, as people develop virtues, and their vision of the good life and those virtues combine into a habitual second nature, their vision begins to take on meaning for them, which is often expressed in the ways such people label themselves.

"Virtuous and vicious acts imply not only 'what we do' and 'why we do it' but also 'who we become through our acts"' (Titus, 2016, 450). For example, simply knowing that someone is a teacher, we may conclude that they are the type of person whose character, or second nature, is that of someone who pursues the good of knowledge and education for the sake of educating others. We can also assume some of the day-to-day activities and habits they engage in as part of their job, and we would hope that this person possesses those virtues that would allow them to be not just a teacher, but an excellent teacher. An excellent teacher, or a teacher considered to be living a flourishing life, would be someone who has developed the appropriate skills and set the proper goals associated with teaching, and who has done so for the right reason in the right way at the right time and in regards to the right person(s). To be an excellent teacher is to have developed all the virtuous requisites for excellent teaching such as humility, patience, prudence, wisdom, gentleness, zeal, and vigilance, to name just a few (Higgins, 2011).

Thus, the life of such a person can be expressed in the concise description of them being an *excellent teacher* because that description has taken on meaning for that person, a meaning that can not only be recognized by others are excellent and morally worthy, but which reveals something profound about the nature of human nature and human possibility. The more the person seeks to be an excellent teacher, the more meaningful the

description of teacher becomes to them – and others – as they develop the habits of a life dedicated to excellent teaching.

In sum, human behavior, as understood from the perspective of virtue ethics, is the outgrowth of five intimately inter-related concepts. First, all human behavior can be understood as reflective of a person's vision of the good life. Second, that vision of the good life is manifest in action. Third, pursuit of the worthwhile goals of a good life requires that people develop intellectual and character traits that help them to pursue their goals with excellence. Those traits are referred to as virtues. Fourth, continual pursuit of a good life and the development of virtues leads to the creation of one's character, a second nature in which the manifest actions of one's chosen virtues and goals become habits. Fifth, the habitual lifestyle that people take on becomes meaningful to them (and others) and comes to represent and organize their day-to-day living and goals. In short, being virtuous and living a flourishing life becomes who the person is—it is their very disposition to be virtuous and to seek after virtue (Titus, 2016; van Hooft, 2006).

Getting Clear on Habits and Virtues

It is possible, at this point, that some readers may come away from our description of virtue, habit, flourishing, and excellence thinking that virtues are the only habitual characteristics which human beings can develop. However, Aristotle is quick to show that the moral character strengths of virtues exist in contrast to immoral character flaws or vices. We are convinced that through careful consideration of both virtues and vices, not only can the lives of human beings be more fully understood, but also that this understanding can help us in very practical ways to more directly and fruitfully help others who are in distress and face certain kinds of moral, psychological, and behavioral difficulties.

From a virtue ethics perspective, we take it as true that people are capable of developing both virtues and vices. They are capable of acting and becoming either virtuous or vicious. And, when sufficiently intentionally practiced, the virtues or vices they choose can become second nature to them, defining in expansive ways their character as the persons they have worked to become. Of course, as we noted previously, the reality is that most people act in both virtuous and vicious ways. Nonetheless, striving to be virtuous is the proper fulfillment of human existence and the ultimate good, the fruit of which is the peace and contentment of a flourishing life (Aristotle, 2004; Fowers et al., 2017; Titus, 2016). A flourishing life is one in which the recursive cycle of habitual living is pointed towards virtue, and a non-flourishing life – a life that is less than fully human – is one that is directed towards and shaped by vice.

In order to provide a clearer analysis of how virtue ethics helps makes sense of CPU and opens up certain avenues for treatment, it is necessary to first characterize the nature of habit more fully. Habits can be thought of as a way to explain why people are so often able to act without having to consciously deliberate on their actions. In other words, the concept of habit can help us understand how people are able to coordinate and aim themselves at certain actions without necessarily thinking about them in a detached, deliberative, or critically reflective way. As Dunnington (2011) explains, "habits qualify and coordinate desires" in that "many habits, and in particular many of the virtues [and vices], cannot be understood apart from the passions to which they give shape and coordination," and as such, "habits are fundamentally strategies of desire" (Dunnington, 2011, 61).

This means that the habits by which we act are designed to "act on cue" (Dunnington, 2011, 62) out of a response to relevant situational stimuli to obtain some end-goal and are reflective of the vision of a good life that the person has continually sought after. The more an action is habitual, the less hesitation there is in a person engaging that habit when a situation calls for it. This means that while people can certainly act in virtuous ways without it being a habitual mode of acting, the more they act in according with a particular virtue and the more they see it as being a part of who they are, the more that virtue becomes a matter of habit—and the more it becomes a matter of habit, the more it becomes a matter of character. Habits, then, are learned through a mix of repeated and deliberate action, and guidance and feedback from trusted leaders, relationships, and even broader cultural norms (Fowers, 2005).

However, it is clearly the case that obtaining some goals, and much of our day-to-day acting, requires more than one habit, skill, or ability, requiring instead a coordination of many of our habits, actions, or abilities. A simple or single habit would be something like brushing one's teeth, which requires very few (if not only one) simple abilities to accomplish. However, a complex habit – for example, something like being an excellent teacher – would be something requiring the coordination of many habits of virtue and many other skills and abilities.

"Habits are difficult to change" (Dunnington, 2011; Schalow, 2017, 61) because "habituation is not automatic" (Littlejohn, 2017), but requires deliberation and repetition (Stichter, 2018). Another way to think about this is that deliberation is the space where old habits meet new habits. To change a habit, then, a person has to engage in a difficult process of re-habituation, which, if a previous habit has been engaged in for years, can be all the more difficult to do. Furthermore, complex habits are even more difficult to change than simple ones (Spalding et al., 2019). Understanding habits and the effort required to change them can help make sense of the fact that even though a person may want to change, they might still have difficulty not engaging in the old habit compulsively.

What is a habit then? We will conclude with the straightforward definition provided by Dunnington (2011): "A habit is a relatively permanent acquired modification of a person that enables the person, when provoked by the relevant stimulus, to act consistently, successfully and with ease with respect to some objective" (Dunnington, 2011). From a virtue ethics standpoint, then, the concept of habit allows for non-deliberative (i.e., involuntary) behavior that is nonetheless meaningful and reflective of the person's desires and even innermost loves (Smith, 2016). That is, while habits may well begin in the context of intentional, deliberative choice, once formed and solidified they no longer require deliberation to bring about their intended ends. That does not mean, however, that their founding intention has disappeared or no longer matters – it is still present at the foundation of the habit itself and continues to live in the continued performance of the habit.

Considering LDS Doctrine

Not only are virtue language and concepts woven throughout gospel teachings (e.g., see Christofferson, 2009, 2026), but the Restored Gospel also further clarifies and expands on the virtue-ethics understanding of human nature and life. Probably the most important way in which the Restored Gospel adds depth and sophistication to the virtue ethics perspective is that it provides for us the revealed and clear picture of what a truly good life is about, what it means to live well in light of the Plan of Salvation, and what our fundamental nature and purpose is as more than merely human beings, but as literal sons and daughters of God. For members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we know of the Plan of Salvation, and we have received restored truths about who Jesus Christ is and the attributes (e.g., Christ-like attributes) we should develop on our path to becoming good and virtuous even as He is.

We know which kinds of goods, goals, and purposes are of eternal worth, and we know the ways that we should act as we seek to fulfill those eternal purposes. We also have in Jesus Christ an exemplar to teach us how we should live, how and what we should desire, and what it is that is worth striving for. Indeed, we have been instructed by apostles and prophets, ancient and modern, that "if there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy," then we are to "seek after these things" (Articles of Faith, 1:13).

Furthermore, we have been assured that we are not alone in our pursuit of an eternally flourishing life. Through the power of Divine Grace (Jacob 4:7; Moroni 10:32-33; Titus, 2016), we are enabled and strengthened on our quest for eternal life. As Titus (2016) explains, "the gift of grace builds up natural inclinations and habitual dispositions of human nature in the process called sanctification" (Titus, 2016) as we strive towards being more holy or more in line with an exalted life. For Aristotle, knowledge of the good life is primarily obtained through exercise of our natural, rational faculties (van Hooft, 2006). However, the Restored Gospel teaches us that rational reflection is not the only, or in many cases the primary, way in which we can obtain such knowledge; that is, much that we must know about what is good and right can be obtained through revelation, both ec-

clesiastical and personal. This means that we are not meant to rely solely on our own rational capacities, but can instead seek divine direction, healing, and knowledge about how to live well directly from He who is the Truth (John 14:6).

Accordingly, repentance, healing, and change are possible and as we show forth a willingness to develop new habits, Christ can change us, our hearts, and our desires, thereby allowing new, virtuous habits to unfold in the process. It is in this way that a Latter-day Saint perspective on virtue differs importantly from a merely rational, Aristotelian understanding of virtue ethics. Furthermore, in the Restored Gospel, we are called to be more virtuous through invitations to participate in ordinances and accept covenants that remind us to actively live higher and holier lives of Christian discipleship (Christofferson, 2009) by placing us in a "context of moral duty" (Thayne, 2009) towards God and His children (i.e., our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ). In sum, the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ and Christian discipleship ultimately shows us what a virtuous and flourishing life truly looks like and what such a life is and must be aimed at: becoming like Christ and joining Him in eternal living.

Now to close our description of virtue ethics, let us review its main concepts. We have described how many of the habits constituting the substance of our daily living and acting, feeling, thinking, and relating can be characterized in terms of both simple and complex virtues and vices. Such habits embody a meaningful vision of the good life that the person has fashioned for themselves and can also reflect things the person has learned from leaders, relationships, and cultural norms. Thus, fully formed and lived habits are those that have become a second nature that, in part, reflects a person's goals, character, and reasons for acting the way they do in the specific situations of daily living. They can also sometimes reflect the culture and context in which the person lives. Vicious and complex habits can be changed (although sometimes with great difficulty) through deliberate and repeated practice of pursuing virtuous actions. The Restored Gospel adds to virtue ethics a clear vision of the truly virtuous and flourishing life that is exemplified by Christ, accessible through revelation, and attainable by His grace.

Virtue Ethics and Compulsive Pornography Use

Our exploration of the basic features of a virtue ethics approach paves the way for a more specific discussion of some of the ways in which the approach can help make sense of CPU. There are several ways to define and explain CPU using virtue ethics. We will start by sharing and then unpacking two quotes that explain CPU in terms that reflect the virtue ethics framework. First, properly understood, CPU is a vicious complex habit guiding a person towards "misguided ends" as "the extreme expression of ordinary human motives" (Fowers et al., 2017, 183). Second, as Schalow (2017) points out, "the self can either 'own up' to its existence or refrain from doing so, find guidance in the boundaries of its existence or transgress them in 'destructive' acts, and, ultimately, set the priorities of life or undermine them in the pursuit of a single indulgence—which, in simple terms describes what addiction *is* [sic]" (Schalow, 2017, 28).

In these two quotes, we find language reflective of the conception of personhood put forth in the virtue ethics framework. Remember that the virtue ethics framework posits that human beings have a fundamental nature – i.e., they are purposive actors and rational, social, and moral beings – and this nature must be reflected in a person's actions in order for them achieve excellence (i.e., moral and practical goodness) in their function or purpose as persons. Also, remember that habit mediates between that fundamental nature and the behaviors a person engages in on a day-to-day basis. The above quotes indicate that CPU is an expression of normal daily motivations and desires that have been misdirected toward improper goals, and which have been reinforced by complex, vicious habits.

In the second quote, for example, the phrase "The self can either 'own up' to its existence or refrain from doing so" highlights that a compulsive pornography user has taken up a vision of the good life that denies or violates the fundamental nature of their moral personhood. A flourishing life, as we have argued, is a life that reflects the nature of one's personhood in excellent ways. In other words, a person who is living a flourishing life is a person who is excellent in the

ways in which they relate to others, the moral depth and sensitivity of their judgment, the emotional propriety of the responses to the world, and are clear and wise in their reasoning. They are someone whose life is directed towards achieving choice-worthy ends. In this light, then, the quotes above suggest that a person caught up in CPU is someone who has been caught up in doing the opposite of flourishing by pursuing non-choice-worthy ends that have been reinforced by developed, complex vices (i.e., vicious habits) of thought, feeling, and behavior. This is the essence of a "vicious cycle," a concept that stems from virtue ethics and which points to the ways in which a person can be caught up in habits of doing that which is vicious or destructive and immoral.

At this point, we anticipate a possible objection to our virtue ethics conception of CPU. Most of those who struggle with CPU, particularly in the Church, are good people who live ordinary, decent, and even (in other areas) quite successful lives. Given that fact, some may wonder whether we are saying that all who struggle with CPU are bad people and are focused on the wrong goals in life. Such is not, however, what we are arguing. We acknowledge that most compulsive pornography users are in fact decent people who generally seek to live virtuous lives and, thus, in most situations, act well. We do not wish to be read as suggesting that people who struggle with pornography are inherently bad or evil or have a vision of the good life that is in fact completely vicious and false.

However, as we will show, it is precisely because the complex habits of CPU are often so nonobvious and so deeply ingrained in the "predicaments" (Schalow, 2017, 28) of daily life that CPU is so pernicious and insidious. In other words, much of our daily living in the modern world helps make it so that compulsive pornography "fits" right into our lives. As Schalow (2017) argues, the habits and vision of the good life that constitutes daily modern living are also constitutive of the "everydayness and 'norms' of addictive practices" (p. 28) in such a way that it can be difficult to even notice their presence (see also, Fowers et al., 2017). In some sense, the norms of addictive practices are easily taken for granted and thus easily hidden in the modern assumptions about how people should live their lives. That is what can make such addictive practices so hard to overcome or replace with more virtuous habits.

Authors such as Smith (2016), Grant (2015), Wilkens and Sanford (2009), Harrison (2016), and Noble (2021) have all convincingly shown that there are entire worldviews, and their associated and sustaining values, practices, and habits, embedded within modern life that serve to educate and shape us in a particular vision of the good life, one that is often contrary to the demands and expectations of Christian discipleship and the Christian vision of the flourishing life. It is this, we will argue, that so often makes it possible for CPU to fit so easily into our forms of modern living, even the modern living of people who are striving to be Christian.

How CPU Fits Into Our Modern Lives

So, what is it about modern living that enables CPU to fit in so easily? For this discussion, we will answer the question in two stages: First, we will describe the modern vision of the good life in which CPU fits so easily, and second, we will discuss the modern-day vices that reinforce it.

It is not surprising that sex, as part of human life and relationships, has come to be a dominating concern of much of modern life because it is everywhere and more easily accessible than ever before (Regnerus, 2017), so much so that the widespread distribution of easy-access porn could be reasonably considered as a major contributing factor to the increased prevalence of CPU. However, it is not just the free and widespread accessibility of sex that is of key importance to our modern vision of the good life. Recall that a vision of the good life defines both who a person fundamentally sees themselves as (i.e., the meaning of their nature) and what goals the person sees as being worthy of pursuing.

With regards to sexuality, then, it has been argued by numerous observers that, in its obsessive concern with sexuality, our modern culture also instantiates for us a particular understanding of what it means to be a person in which personhood is characterized as primarily rooted in an inward, plastic, infinitely malleable and hyper-sexualized self (see e.g., Grant, 2015; Noble, 2021; Trueman, 2020). In other words, sexuality in modern life

has become not just a facet of human nature, one among many, but central to our understanding of both who we are as human beings and who we ought to be (Trueman, 2020). Thus, a normal human desire is easily misguided; sexual desiring becomes central to our self-understanding of who we are and of what the good life is. Even those who do not believe that all sexual desires should be expressed still often accept the idea that sexuality is at the core of human identity.

Littlejohn (2017) and Schalow (2017) have added that, with technology becoming so central to modern life, living artificially chosen lifestyles has become more possible than ever (e.g., created avatars and no moral accountability). Technology has also broadened horizons and created an almost limitless supply of ways to obtain instant gratification for every passing desire, no matter how small (Littlejohn, 2017; Schalow, 2017). We are reliant on technology for work, for play, for relaxation, and for entertainment, and we have come to naturally turn to technology and smart devices when there is a need for fulfillment or a gap in our schedule (Littlejohn, 2017). Take the modern vision of the good life with the centrality of sexual identity and the dominance of technology that constitute the "everydayness" of our lives (Schalow, 2017, 28), then add the addictive "hook" (Schalow, 2017, 47) of pornography (i.e., its pleasure and the need to for fulfillment or relief brought on by some life event such as losing a loved one), and it becomes clear that pornography fits right into our modern conception of the good life. As Noble (2021) states:

> Pornography assumes that we are each our own and belong to ourselves. It's a tool that promises to give us a kind of personal validation, a sense of identity, a taste of meaningfulness, and a glimpse of intimate belonging ... Rather than helping us meet our responsibilities and cope with an inhuman world, it exacerbates our condition... leaving us addicted, depressed, exhausted, lonely, and bored. (p. 63)

In short, pornography promises fulfillment of the desire for the type of good life advertised by modern culture but instead leads to the very emptiness of purpose which people seek to fill through pornography, resulting in an endlessly vicious cycle. In addition to the modern-day vision of the good life in which CPU "fits right in," a number of vices are embedded in our culture and, thus, salient in our day-to-day living within that culture, which consequently reinforces that vision. We will briefly explore just two of those vices.

It can be said that modern technology has left us with more leisure time than ever before (Hütter, 2013; Sherk, 2007). Consequently, our lives are replete with moments of *boredom*. Boredom is a vice, it reflects the abandonment of intentional purpose in favor of bland meaninglessness, uninterest in things that are interesting, and unwillingness to engage in worthy actions and constructive pursuit. Paradoxically, we seem to fixate on feelings of boredom or see them as a problem that needs to be fixed, indicative of a void needing to be filled (Hütter, 2013). Consequently, many of us feel that we must, in every waking moment, be doing something, no matter how dull and unimportant that thing might actually be. With technology readily available, we so often reach for our phones when we feel there is nothing to do, rather than practicing the virtue of stillness (Psalm 46:10). Given that the internet is inundated with pornography, the viewing of which often provides users with bursts of elated energy that seems to counteract their boredom, at least temporarily, it is no surprise that it is something to which we so frequently and so easily turn.

Additionally, our culture's emphasis on the priority of the individual leads many to lean into the vice of *isolation*, which is vicious because it is contrary to our fundamentally social nature (Fowers et al., 2017). Despite the fact that private self-focus and isolation appear to lead to increased depression and anxiety (Mor and Winquist, 2002), much of modern culture bends toward a singular focus on the individual self. By encouraging practices such as taking time to be alone each day as an expression of our authenticity and as a therapeutic intervention to help us "discover [ourselves] and find [our] own voice," our contemporary culture encourages isolation (Carter, 2012a,b). Whether by choice or by circumstance, being alone is part of our daily lives, and that is not necessarily a bad

thing. However, when the isolated, autonomous self and its needs are emphasized and prioritized in our culture (Wilkens and Sanford, 2009), many may come to habitually isolate themselves from others – and, as any compulsive porn user knows, isolation is a recipe for indulgence.

Taken together, the modern vision of the good life centered on technology, sexuality, along with the vices of boredom, isolation, and other such vices, provides the breeding ground for the vicious cycle of "addictive practices" (Schalow, 2017, p. 28) that are at the heart of CPU. Many are caught in this vicious trap in some way or another without even fully realizing what is taking place. All that has to happen for CPU to take hold is for a curious person to indulge in viewing pornography, perhaps even only a few times, and they can subtly and quickly have formed a vicious habit, one that can trap them in a fundamentally inhuman way of understanding themselves and others. Granted, not all people who struggle with CPU fully indulge in the modern-day vision of the good life with all its accompanying vices. Nevertheless, the virtue ethics framework we have outlined here suggests that all compulsive pornography users are pursuing misguided goals and have developed daily vices that trap them in a compulsive cycle of pornography viewing.

Clinical Implications: Catching a Vision of a Virtuous Life

If CPU is properly understood as a vicious, complex habit of living, then healing (i.e., treatment and therapy) cannot simply be about taking a pill, finding some way to "re-wire the brain," or practicing coping skills aimed at managing biological impulses until the compulsion is "fixed." On the contrary, healing is found in dedicating oneself to actively, intentionally living in new, virtue-focused ways that are consonant with a flourishing, genuinely human, life. In other words, helping a client replace vice with virtue is not simply a matter of applying some technique or intervention that works to stop compulsive behavior. Rather, the invitation to virtue is about coming to live a complete, coherent, and worthwhile life in which the viciousness of CPU has no place because the desires which constitute it have been replaced with worthier desires and a better vision of the good life, who one is, and what one is genuinely capable of being. It requires that we completely reconsider the form of life we live day-to-day—our goals and aspirations, our desires, our daily habits, and the meaning of those habits—as we work to re-orient ourselves towards a richer version of ourselves and the flourishing life that comes from living in a more virtuous manner.

In other words, to heal from CPU, a person must reconstruct their life by reconstructing their vision of the good life and replacing the vicious habits contributing to their compulsive use with virtuous ones that provide new life, new purpose, and deeper meaning. For practical therapeutic purposes, this process can be simplified into three general phases or principles of therapy. We say principles because these phases are not necessarily linear.

First, therapists should focus on helping their clients open themselves up to the possibility of a new way of living. Simply put, they need to "catch the vision of a virtuous life." To do this, clients must first come to realize both their own morally agentic nature and the habitual nature of their CPU. In other words, they must come to see both themselves as they really are *and* CPU as it really is so they can see that true healing and change is in fact possible for them. Consequently, clients, realizing their true nature, can open themselves up to considering that the life they are living can be lived in a different way and for better reasons. Accordingly, they can consider a new vision of the good life in which CPU has no place. This is what Schalow (2017) calls "ontological openness," or an openness to fundamental change and transformation from who we were or are to who we can become.

Discussions of the reality and meaning of moral agency, the possibility of transformative change, the distinctions between virtue and vice, and the nature of habits are all ways therapists can accomplish this. Additionally, this phase almost always requires some exploration and critique of a few of the cultural norms and daily habits that we have inherited from our larger modern cultural conception of the good life, norms and habits that help give rise to and sustain clients' CPU. For example, it may be important to help clients see that contrary to what passes for conventional wisdom

in our larger culture, sexuality, sexual expression, and sexual identity are not of utmost importance in understanding who they really are. Rather, clients can be invited to replace concern for sexual identity with a recognition of their eternal identity, and to embrace the revealed truth that they belong to God, not just themselves, and that they have been made in His image and are (and always have been and will be) loved and adored by Him (Noble, 2021). Such critiques can be supplemented by working on clients' rationalizations (e.g., denial) that keep them in thrall to their vicious habits because "viciousness [is] made possible by rationalization [or denial]" (Fowers et al., 2017, 193). An alternative vision of the good life and virtues needed to achieve healing and a flourishing life can then be explored and offered to clients as a real possibility they can envision and embrace.

Second, healing focuses on helping clients develop virtues to replace the vices that reinforce CPU (Dunnington, 2011). Each healing virtue corresponds with one of the four fundamental aspects of human nature, according to the virtue ethics framework. It must be pointed out, however, that these virtues should be practiced for their own sake as corresponding to a better vision of the good life. Virtues are to be sought for and practiced for the permanent changes they can bring about in a client's character and lifestyle, not simply as coping skills or tools (i.e., means to other ends) that can be dropped once the client stops compulsively viewing pornography (Dunnington, 2011; Fowers et al., 2017). In practical implementation, therapists work with clients first to understand these virtues, and then to come up with goals on how to develop such virtues over time, making sure that those goals are at least in part reflective of a lifestyle in which pornography has no place. Overall, the many virtues we will discuss here do not necessarily constitute an exhaustive list, but they could be considered a sufficient list to help the client start to heal and change.

With regards to the purposive nature of human beings, therapists can help clients practice *intentionality*, which is to act with a clear purpose in mind. "We exercise our agency well when we make choice[s] intentionally" (Fowers et al., 2017, 29). This virtue is probably the most fundamental for healing because deliberate pursuit of new habits is how virtue is acquired. Clients can be deliberate without it being a habitual characteristic of who they are. Once acting purposively becomes a habit, however, clients can be said to possess the virtue of intentionality. Accordingly, clients are encouraged to start seeing the ways that they do not act intentionally, especially during times when the temptation to look at porn is strong, such as when the client is idle or bored.

To clarify, intentionality is not the same as busyness, nor does it mean that clients need to become workaholics or fill every waking moment with some intense activity. It means that they learn to be intentional and purposive in how they use their time, such as when using technology, for example. Even when they are simply relaxing in order to restore their energy, they practice purposively choosing to relax and deliberately deciding on an activity that will help them to do so, rather than mindlessly scrolling on their phone or browsing inappropriate websites. A person can act intentionally without it necessarily being a virtue in the sense we have been discussing here, but acting intentionally, with clear purpose, over time leads to a client to act intentionally out of habit.

Although there are other healing virtues pertaining to the purposive nature of human being, we will only briefly mention one more: *temperance*. The virtue of temperance is concerned with both how we engage in an activity, the degree of engagement that is appropriate, and also the way in which we use tools – i.e., for the proper purpose for which they have been given and doing so in the right amount (Pieper, 2020). For example, teaching clients that the proper use of the bathroom is simply to "go to the bathroom" and to get ready for the day, not to scroll on their phones or hide away from prying eyes, because the proper purpose of a phone is communication. As an instrument intended to facilitate communication, a phone does not belong in the bathroom, a place not appropriate for its proper, temperate use.

In the realm of social being, there are several healing virtues for clients to consider. As with developing a virtuous life, the first two steps of the healing process require deliberate practice (Stichter, 2018), often guided by the mentorship or sponsorship of moral exemplars (Westin, 2020). This alludes to the virtue of *friendship.*

We mentioned *honesty* before, and it is probably the most well-known virtue discussed in addiction recovery programs, along with the mentorship involved with the virtue of friendship (LDS Family Services, 2005; Stichter, 2018). Being honest about compulsive pornography viewing with a spouse, other loved ones, and/or appropriate leaders helps clients break the barrier of shame and be more open about their suffering so that they can get help form a variety of supportive sources.

Additionally, we offer that clients need to learn *vulnerability* in order to be able to open up about their struggles, not only with CPU but also with any difficult or stressful life situation. Many clients see pornography as a way to deal with the stresses of life, leading them to isolate themselves when stressed, and forcing them to deal with challenges on their own. Therefore, developing the habit of being vulnerable about stress and other struggles, rather than isolating oneself, teaches clients that they do not have to suffer alone. Further, it has the benefit of keeping them away from the isolation that makes compulsive pornography viewing so easy. Subsequently, clients learn to suffer with others in their pain, which is the virtue of *compassion* or mercy toward others and toward themselves (Fowers et al., 2017; Snyder, 2020).

In the realm of human reason, *prudence* is the virtue of being able to act quickly, wisely, and in the most virtuous way in a given situation. This is why it is referred to as the virtue that organizes all other virtues (Pieper, 2020). Clients learn this virtue by practicing intentionality and by working to deal with problems of life through moments of contemplation in which they slow down their response to difficult situations or even situations in which they are simply bored or idle. *Practical wisdom* (Fowers et al., 2017), what Aristotle termed *phronesis*, is the flip side of the coin of prudence in that it is the virtue of knowing how best to go about enacting the virtue required in a given situation (i.e., implementation). For example, a prudent client, upon finding themselves alone, would recognize that the best thing to do in that moment is to avoid going on their phone and searching for porn. A wise client would then conclude that the best way to avoid their phone is to leave their phone in the room and perhaps go read a book instead.

The last virtue we will briefly discuss, though there are many others which we have already alluded to and will allude to here, has to do with the moral nature of human beings. Knowledge and experience of grace, and the humble recognition of needing help to heal, can help clients develop the virtue of *reverence*, or a deep respect for the complexities of life and the fact that we cannot control every aspect of our own healing, including knowing exactly how such healing will or must occur (Fowers et al., 2017). As Woodruff (2001) states, "reverence is the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have" (p. 8). For the client struggling with CPU, then, it is vital that they learn through habitual practice how to appreciate their own limitations and abilities, as well as God's awe-inspiring grace, how to sense when feelings of shame are appropriate and when they are an unnecessary hindrance to progress, and how respect for others as fully human (rather than merely digital images or fantasies for one's own use) entails respect for one's own humanity. Reverence can be nurtured by patiently enduring the sometimes lengthy and often painful process of healing unfolds, as well as through waiting and watching with the Lord as He brings about the awe-inspiring miracle of transformative healing in our souls, and as he does so according to His "own due time" (1 Ne. 10:3) and in His "own way" (D&C 104:16).

As can be imagined, the second phase or principle of therapy we just described, focused as it is on understanding and developing the virtues for healing, constitutes most of the therapeutic process. The first two phases lead up to and naturally give way to the final phase or principle: helping clients re-orient their lives toward the good and virtuous (van Hooft, 2006). Although much of the time and energy of therapy will be focused on the first two steps outlined above, and particularly on articulating and implementing particular virtues, significant efforts in therapy can be focused more generally on helping clients make their lives well-ordered. This can be done by helping them to focus on some of the basic life-skills many therapists are already familiar with in notions of self-care: eating well, sleeping well, exercising, taking care of important relationships, dealing with stress

in healthy ways, etc.

Additionally, this final principle of healing encourages clients and therapists to seek personal revelation about what changes need to be made in conjunction with developing virtue in order to allow healing and fundamental change to occur. We should remember both that it is ultimately only through Christ and His grace that clients' hearts can be healed, and also that they may need the help of others as they work to embrace a new and different way of living in the world. In the end, through grace, revelation, and the deliberate practice of Christ-like virtue, the client's life will become a new life in which pornography use has no place.

Clients are encouraged in all ways to be "anxiously engaged" (D&C 58:27) in the proper pursuit of covenant discipleship and living. This can be accomplished first by inviting clients to refocus their efforts on understanding their covenants more intentionally through (1) careful prayer and scripture study, (2) frequently visiting the temple and pondering on ways to apply the temple covenants in their lives, (3) studying the words of our latter-day prophets, and (4) truly pondering on the words of the sacrament each week. Next, clients can set clear goals and plans in accordance with what they learn and understand about covenant discipleship. Examples of clear, covenant-related goals could include accepting a new calling, preparing to serve a mission, preparing for a temple marriage, preparing to worthily attend the sealing of a loved one, and preparing to serve in the temple.

Having a clearly identified goal that is farther along the covenant path than where the client currently is challenges the client to rise up and be more virtuous than they currently are as they strive to emulate the life of the Savior. As they do so, they must more fully rely on Christ's grace that will sanctify them (i.e., make them more holy and virtuous), "which grace is a gift to man based on his faith. . . to remain loyal to [his covenants]" (Christofferson, 2001). Although it can require a lot of time and effort, transformative change can (mercifully) take place as clients seek after a life of covenant discipleship, a way of living which assumes, like the virtue ethics framework we have presented here, that "just as vital as what [disciples] do, is who [they] are and who [they] are becoming" (*Preach My Gospel*, Chap. 6). And, in so doing and in so becoming, they will receive a "new heart" (Ezekiel 36:26) and have "no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2).

In the end, it must be emphasized that any healing achieved through a virtue ethics understanding of CPU and corresponding approaches to treatment and therapy, which are oriented toward the path of covenant Christian discipleship taught in the Restored Gospel, is ultimately made possible only in and through the merits, mercy, and ongoing atoning sacrifice of our Savior, Jesus Christ (Williams and Gantt, 2020).

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The Failure of the Therapeutic: A Latter-day Saint Christian Alternative

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Abstract

This article argues that secular psychology, insofar as it is grounded in naturalism, secular humanism, individualism, and therapeutic affirmation detached from transcendent truth, does not possess the conceptual, moral, or spiritual resources necessary to lead persons out of this malaise. Genuine healing requires more than mere symptom relief or self-affirmation; it requires a fuller account of the human person as a fundamentally moral, spiritual, relational agent oriented toward meanings, obligations, and truths that transcend the individual self. We argue that Latter-day Saint Christianity offers just such an account and possesses the resources necessary to ground theories that sufficiently address the issues that constitute the malaise of modernity. It does so by locating healing in Christlike compassion, understood as the inseparable union of love (or, charity) and truth-telling. We suggest that integrating the truth and love requires that faithful Latter-day Saint clinicians become disciple-clinicians who seek God's guidance, develop sensitivity to truth and love, tell patients the truth compassionately, and foster the moral and spiritual sensitivities of those they serve. Alterity Focused Therapy is presented as one possible clinical expression of this framework, organized around doing what is best for the other, gathering more information with curiosity rather than judgment, and living, sharing, and supporting others in living out these principles in relationships.

***Keywords*:** moral agency, Alterity Focused Therapy, Emmanuel Levinas, relational healing, Christian therapy.

For well-over a century now, the discipline of psychology has claimed to possess a privileged, scientific understanding of human moral, emotional, and interpersonal distress, as well as the origins of the social discord that inevitably accompanies such things (Fuller et al., 2013; Feest, 2022; Hughes, 2018; Kardas, 2023; Miller et al., 2013). Psychological theorists, researchers, and therapists alike have proclaimed that naturalistic psychological accounts of human behavior can provide a firm scientific basis for developing the interventions and techniques needed to overcome all manner of human social and emotional problems (Cacioppo et al., 2004; David et al., 2018;

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Hill and Dahlitz, 2022; Mahrer, 2000; Rieken and Gelo, 2015).

However, clear evidence for the sufficiency of such accounts and the validity of such claims is still very much in question given that over the decades we have seen not a decrease in, but rather an increase in rates of depression, anxiety, suicide, feelings of isolation, alienation, and hopelessness, the breakdown of the family and the collapse of the institution of marriage, and the erosion of sexual standards and moral sensibilities (Alicandro et al., 2019; Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, 2018; Curtin et al., 2016; Hillman and Ventura, 1993; Lebrun-Harris et al., 2022; Mojtabai et al., 2016; Stone et al., 2018; Trueman, 2020; Twenge et al., 2010). All of these reflect what philosopher Charles Taylor has called the malaise of modernity (Taylor, 1991). This malaise, or crisis in meaning, has brought about the rapid disintegration of our communities and our social, political, and moral order.

The malaise of modernity may be best understood as a precursor or catalyst to our present discordant society. When our moral, social, political, and religious lives are ungrounded, we find ourselves experiencing a pervasive sense of unease and discontent. Throughout our daily lives, this is manifest in feelings of alienation from our families and communities, existential questioning about one's identity and life's purpose, and strained relationships due to the pervasive cultural value and assumption of self-interest (Doherty, 2022; Gantt and Thayne, 2014; Gantt and Williams, 2021; Miller, 1999). Drawing on David Foster Wallace's work, Christian philosopher J. K. A. Smith (Smith, 2014) paints a picture of this world—what Taylor (Taylor, 2007) calls a Secular Age—in which many of us find ourselves. He describes a world of:

> almost suffocating immanence, a flattened human universe where the escapes are boredom and distraction, not ecstasy and rapture. Hell is self-consciousness, and our late modern, TV-ized (now Twitter-ized) world only ramps up our self-awareness to an almost paralyzing degree. God is dead, but he's replaced by everybody else. Everything is permitted, but everybody is watching. So most of the time the best "salvation" we can hope for is found in behaviors that numb us to this reality: drugs, sex, entertainments of various sorts. (p. 14)

The world Smith is describing is all but unavoidable given that, as Ledewitz (2009) notes, "secularism has failed to establish a ground for human existence" (p. 36). That is, "secularism has not given us a way to orient ourselves to reality" because it "does not know how to answer questions like, what is the purpose of human life? or what may I hope for?" (p. 36). Indeed, Ledewitz (2009) argues that secularism "does not even like to think seriously about such questions" (p. 36). When our moral, social, political, and religious lives are ungrounded, we find ourselves experiencing a pervasive sense of unease and discontent. This instability and rootlessness lead to expressions of dissatisfaction, division, conflict, and the erosion of trust, we find ourselves surrounded by or even participating in a vicious cycle as the things that characterize our modern, secular age create even more intense malaise, which, in turn, furthers the discordance (Mohler, 2020).

Presently, psychology functions as one of the dominant interpretive frameworks for such human suffering. Where people once turned primarily to religious leaders, family systems, inherited moral traditions, and communities of faith to make sense of sorrow, guilt, grief, desire, marital conflict, moral obligation, and personal distress, many now turn to therapists, psychological concepts, diagnostic language, and therapeutic categories. This transition or shift is significant because psychology is no longer merely one profession among others. For many, it has become the language by which they understand what is wrong with themselves and others, what counts as harm, what love requires, what responsibility means, what obligation demands, and what healing consists of.

It is through psychology's interpretive lens that much of our culture has sought to remedy the malaise of modernity—our crisis of meaning—by articulating harm in terms of childhood wounds and neurological wiring, love in terms of attachment and oxytocin, responsibility as responsibility only for personal happiness, obligation as oppressive, and healing as a lifelong journey of cop-

ing with triggers. As such, psychology's attempts to address the malaise of modernity are more akin to sedatives and painkillers than a genuine healing balm, leaving the richness of human experience and relationships all the more hollow and ungrounded.

Many within contemporary psychology recognize the growing mental health and related challenges faced by many in the world today (see McPhillips, 2022). However, as Taylor (2007) notes, because almost all contemporary psychotherapies, and the theories on which they are founded, are based in "a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing" (p. 18, see, e.g., Ellis, 1992; Skinner, 1987; Rogers, 1951, 1965), they are singularly ill-equipped to address human moral and emotional problems at their deepest level or provide genuinely meaningful solutions to those problems. Because modern psychological approaches to human experience leave out such concerns as moral realism, transcendence and transcendent spirituality, and the meaningful possibility of non-contingent or divine truth, they do not and cannot fully account for the breadth and depth and inherent meaningful purposiveness of human experience. As Smith (2014), citing Taylor's analysis, points out:

> There is a specter haunting our secular age, "the spectre of meaninglessness" (p. 717)—which is, in a sense, a dispatch from fullness. And because this won't go away, but rather keeps pressing and pulling, it generates "unease" (p. 711) and "restlessness" (p. 726). (as cited in Smith, 2014, p. 129)

Indeed, as many have argued, this "spectre of meaninglessness," or spirit of nihilism, is a hallmark of our "Post-truth era" or "Post-Christian world" (see, e.g., Gantt and Williams, 2022; Hittinger, 2003; McIntyre, 2018; Poplin, 2014; Veith, 2020). And, while sole blame for such cannot be laid at the feet of the discipline of psychology, we will contend that the discipline, regardless of its well-meaning intentions, has nonetheless thus far failed to show that it possesses the conceptual and moral resources to adequately respond to the problems we face or provide for lasting healing of the human soul (Dalrymple, 2015; Doherty, 1995, 2022; Gantt and Thayne, 2017; Gantt and Williams, 2022; Williams et al., 2021).

We will argue that while psychology does not possess the necessary resources to provide the sort of intellectual foundation and moral sophistication we need to successfully bridge the social, political, and interpersonal divides we face in this Secular Age, Latter-day Saint Christianity does (Gantt et al., 2015). We will also argue that a psychology informed by the concept of Christ-like compassion is one that would be capable of providing a "peace-full" response to our tumultuous era, a response that offers a surer foundation for navigating the dangerous waters of human affairs in this challenging historical moment.

We will argue that Christianity entails that as psychologists (and other mental health professionals) we have an obligation to engage our patients in genuine, loving, Christ-like compassion—as opposed to its secular humanistic counterfeit (i.e., therapeutic empathy, unbounded affirmation, relativistic non-judgmentalism, etc.). Such compassion, we will argue, requires not only that we embrace and accept others in honest loving concern for them in their hour of suffering and need, but also that we stand firmly and openly in the cause of truth by inviting them to live according to the truth of who they really are and in accord with the kind of life we were all meant to live (Gantt and Thayne, 2017; Williams and Gantt, 2020). In other words, as Trueman (2023) recently argued, much of the world maintains:

> a commitment to the therapeutic anthropology that pervades modern Western society and the implicit assumption that any significant challenge to this from a traditional Christian perspective is unloving or bigoted. . . . The ethic of "love as feeling" rather than "love as directing to the truth" is strong. (para. 2)

Christianity, on the other hand, maintains that genuine love means directing others to truth; that is, to Christ. For the Christian psychologist, then, compassion and truth-telling are inextricably bound up with one another, and neither can be

neglected without emptying the other of its meaning. In what follows, we hope to show that only by compassionate truth-telling can contemporary psychology cease contributing to social and moral chaos of our time and instead begin to point the way toward mutual love and respect, personal and interpersonal wholeness, and a joyous and lasting healing that knits together souls, minds, and hearts.

Psychology and the Waning of Religion

In order to fully appreciate the argument we are making, it will first be important to review the cultural landscape in which we currently find ourselves. Where once we consulted with our religious leaders and family members on issues of morality and emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being, many now consult mental health professionals. As King (2016), a commentator for Quartz magazine, noted: "it seems that many millennials grappling with the big questions in life want to work them out on a psychologist's couch instead of a church pew" (para. 5).

Conjointly, we have also seen the steady increase of the religiously unaffiliated—a group referred to as the "nones"—such that nearly 30% of U.S. adults claim no religious affiliation at all as of 2021, according to the Pew Research Center (2021). This is up nearly ten percentage points from 2011. While King framed our turn to psychologists and away from churches as a positive, critics (Browning and Cooper, 2004; Cummings et al., 2009; Nelson and Slife, 2024) have argued against this psychology and therapy's replacement of traditional religious, particularly Christian, worship.

For example, in *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, Paul Vitz (1977) argued that modern psychology and therapy have, for many individuals, come to replace traditional religion as a source of meaning and guidance in life. He contends that the focus on self-discovery and self-help within psychology has led individuals to elevate their own needs and desires above that of anyone else's such that they are given a quasi-religious status, effectively making psychology a new form of faith or belief system for some, or at the least leaving the patient as their own deity. Lasch (1978) similarly contended that American culture has become a culture of narcissism, eroding the traditional values of community, family, and civic engagement.

Vitz and other like-minded scholars (see, e.g., Entwistle, 2021; Fowers et al., 2024; Frie and Coburn, 2010; Snow, 2015; Vitz and Felch, 2006; Vitz et al., 2020) have continued to address these ideas in a variety of recent works, proposing non-reductionistic frameworks for understanding the human person that seek to combat the moral relativism and unbounded human autonomy proposed by postmodern thinkers. Although not writing from an explicitly religious perspective, Fowers (2010) has argued against one example of psychology's adoption of ego-centric and reductionistic paradigms: instrumentalism as a central ontological and ethical presumption. Fowers (2010) describes instrumentalism this way:

> [Instrumentalism] supports the central values of individual autonomy and satisfaction by promoting the effective pursuit of personal desires. In this way, instrumentalism is intertwined with individualism, which values the pursuit of personally chosen ends above all. Although instrumentalism is usually portrayed as ethically neutral, it is an ethical endeavor because it dictates that choices of values and goals should be left to individuals. The injunction to leave goals and values to individuals is at the core of the modern ethical project of increasing individual freedom of action and potential for success. Moreover, instrumentalism is an ethical perspective because it defines the nature of individuals' relationship with the world and with each other in means–ends terms, suggesting that strategically pursuing subjectively desired ends is the central business of life. (p. 105)

With their conceptual grounding in naturalism, radical individualism, psychological egoism, and instrumentalism many of the prominent therapeutic approaches in psychology ultimately encourage and sustain the idolizing worship of the

individual self as the most viable way to escape emotional and relational pain and suffering. This grounding serves to replace the previously transcendent—religion, God, family, community, and inherited moral order—with the merely immanent self.

The Failure of the Therapeutic

The modern, Western world's turning to psychology as a kind of new religion would not be a concern if the framework of psychology could handle and fruitfully address the issues that have long plagued humanity. However, therapy often lacks the vital resources—transcendence, a grand cosmic order, a framework that dictates what a good life entails, etc.—that have long allowed religion, specifically Christianity, to provide the healing balm that many have sought and have experienced. Indeed, recent decades have even witnessed secular psychologists seeking out and implementing—albeit typically in an instrumental fashion consonant with their naturalistic presuppositions—various traditionally religious or Christian practices because such approaches seem better equipped to facilitate the forms of healing they hope to bring about, as well as seeming to resonate more deeply with their clients (see, e.g., Plante, 2008; Ross et al., 2015; Vieten and Lukoff, 2022).

The kind of concerns that psychology (inadequately) seeks to remedy are often commensurate with the malaise of modernity. This malaise encompasses a pervasive sense of unease, disconnection, and discontent in response to the rapid changes and uncertainties of our modern and postmodern culture (Taylor, 2007). Throughout our daily lives, this manifests in feelings of alienation from our families and communities, existential questioning about life's purpose, and strained relationships shaped by the pervasive cultural value of self-interest. Individuals may also grapple with their identity; worry about who they are and their place in the world; question the constant and ultimately unsatisfying pursuit of material wealth, possessions, and power; and experience intense anxiety about the moral impact of varying kinds of technology on human relationships, the environment, and their own engagement in the world.

Taylor (2007) describes our situation as one in which we continually have a vague sense of loss, one in which "our actions, goals, achievements, and the like, have a lack of weight, gravity, thickness, substance. There is a deeper resonance which they lack, which we feel should be there" (p. 307). The world, and ourselves in it, manifest as a sort of existential and moral "flatland," one where we find ourselves, in the memorable words of Philip Rieff (1966), continuously confronted by the "absurdity of being free to choose and then having no choice worth making" (p. 93). The pervasiveness of this "malaise of immanence" (Smith, 2014) often results in profound experiences of anxiety, boredom, alienation from self and others, and depression, all of which reflect a broader existential, and we contend fundamentally spiritual, struggle for meaning.

Ultimately, we believe that contemporary, secular psychology cannot provide lasting and profound healing for two primary reasons. First, contemporary psychological theories and subsequent interventions are insufficient to address the malaise of our modern, secular world because our psychological theory and practice is too superficial in the way it frames and addresses patient concerns (see, e.g., Watts, 2019). For example, by focusing primarily on efficient symptom relief within a naturalistic and egoistic ontology (see Gantt, 2000, 2005). Second, psychology ignores essential and significant facets of human existence and experience such as transcendence, spirituality, morality, and truth.

Success as Symptom Reduction

One very common way in which psychological researchers define healing and therapeutic success is by measuring degrees of symptom relief. As the historian of psychotherapy and psychiatry Edward Shorter (1997) has noted, "lifting symptoms rather than cultivating a sympathetic rapport in the office [has] remained the ultimate therapeutic objective" (p. 314). Indeed, for most researchers and practitioners, at least those in the mainstream of the discipline, symptom reduction has been and remains the primary (if not the only) standard for judging the efficacy or success of any given therapeutic intervention (see, e.g., Becker et al., 2011; Cuijpers, 2019; van Os et al., 2019). In other words, researchers and therapists alike

tend to understand a therapy to be "working" if a patient reports a reduction of distressing symptoms (Smith and Glass, 1977; Froyd et al., 1996; Crawford et al., 2011).

Patients undergoing therapeutic treatment are almost never queried about how therapy has addressed or alleviated the kind of existential and spiritual malaise at the heart of our modern age. Furthermore, therapists are seldom, if ever, trained to gauge the success of their therapy by such measures that ask questions about the quality of the patient's relationship with their family members and other loved ones, their participation in their civic groups and religious communities, their general feelings and acts toward their fellow human beings, or their sense of moral connection and commitment to larger life meanings and purposes beyond their own emotional states. However, if the malaise of modernity described above is not merely symptomatic but existential, relational, and spiritual, then the way psychotherapy defines success matters.

Psychology's commitment to defining success as symptom reduction is evidenced in the usage of outcome measures that focus on just that. To be clear, this is not to say that outcome measures focused on meaning, morality, spirituality, and relational engagement do not exist. Measures such as the Meaning in Life Questionnaire assess the presence of and search for meaning in life (Steger et al., 2006), and recent work on moral injury has produced measures that assess cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual concerns connected to morally injurious experiences (Griffin et al., 2025). There are also a number of measures designed to assess spiritual and religious experience more directly.

For example, the Spiritual Well-Being Scale assesses religious and existential well-being (Paloutzian and Ellison, 1982; Ellison, 1983), the Brief RCOPE assesses positive and negative religious coping in response to major life stressors (Pargament et al., 2011), and the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale assesses multiple domains of religious and spiritual struggle, including divine, interpersonal, moral, doubt-related, and ultimate meaning concerns (Exline et al., 2014). Similarly, relationally focused measures have been proposed (Muran et al., 1998; Muran, 2002), with the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems being one of the most widely used of such measures (Horowitz et al., 1988).[1] The existence of such measures demonstrates that psychology is not incapable of assessing meaning, moral distress, spiritual struggle, or relational engagement. Indeed, the fact that these measures do not appear to function as the primary way therapeutic success is typically defined in mainstream clinical research or practice provides concrete evidence of psychology's paradigms and priorities in spite of available resources.

It is also worth noting that many measures that initially seem to assess domains outside of symptom reduction nonetheless maintain a focus on how relationships, faith, or spirituality affect the respondent rather than on the ways in which the respondent gives him or herself over to truth, God, neighbor, covenant, duty, or transcendent purpose. For example, the Couples Satisfaction Index—an ostensibly relationally-focused measure—includes questions such as "My relationship with my partner makes me happy" and "I feel that I can confide in my partner about virtually anything" (Funk and Rogge, 2007, p. 582). Similarly, the Spiritual Well-Being Scale includes items assessing whether one receives personal strength and support from God/a Higher Power and whether one's relationship with God/a Higher Power contributes to one's sense of well-being (Paloutzian and Ellison, 1982; Ellison, 1983).

Such questions may provide useful information, but they assess relationships and spirituality largely in terms of the respondent's satisfaction, comfort, strength, support, peace, experience, or perceived benefit. In short, even when psychology moves beyond symptom reduction, it often remains centered on the individual's experience of distress, meaning, injury, satisfaction, functioning, or spiritual well-being rather than on the person's moral, spiritual, and relational engagement with God and others. This falls short of an LDS Christian approach that would holisti-

[1]The Mindset Styles Assessment created by the Arbinger Institute (The Arbinger Institute, nd) is one additional possible example of what a relational outcome measure might look like. However, this measure has not been marketed to nor is it being used regularly by therapists or psychological researchers as far as we are aware. Thus, its potential efficacy and general viability as a helpful indicator is somewhat uncertain.

cally account not only for one's internal emotional state or subjective experience, but also for one's engagement in the world, one's relationship with God and neighbor, and one's impact on others.

This individualizing tendency appears not only in how psychotherapy measures outcomes, but also in how it often explains therapeutic effectiveness. The heart of a therapy's effectiveness, or how it alleviates symptoms, is typically attributed to several crucial elements, among which are the quality of the therapeutic relationship, client motivation, client expectations, corrective experiencing, insight, empathy, cultural adaptation, and self-efficacy (see, e.g., Bailey and Ogles, 2023; Sprenkle et al., 2014; Wampold, 2015).[2]

In contrast, an LDS perspective would take an even more comprehensive approach when gauging the efficacy of its principles and beliefs in the context of therapeutic practice and outcome. Here, the notion of something or someone "working" is defined in a more global, and indeed spiritually expansive, sense—one that revolves around the concept of being reconciled with Christ and with one another by embarking on a journey to become more Christlike in thought, word, and deed, in and through our relationships with God and our neighbor. This does not mean, however, that therapy must be explicitly religious in its language or that patients must share the therapist's religious commitments in order to benefit from truthful and loving therapeutic work. Rather, from a faithful LDS perspective, the theological ground of healing is Christlike compassion, charity, truth, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, even when these realities are approached clinically in language accessible to patients who may not understand or articulate their experience in explicitly religious terms.

Such healing, nonetheless, of course, requires the active participation of the Holy Spirit in the therapeutic relationship as a trustworthy guide for and influence in the therapeutic endeavor. "As Latter-day Saint psychologists," Gantt (2012) has observed, "[we do not] want to be in the confused position of seeking spiritual support while embracing professional and philosophical commitments that do not permit such guidance in the first place" (p. 12). The therapeutic transformation that is incumbent upon a faithfully LDS perspective in therapy is one in which transformation has not only social and psychological dimensions, but even more profoundly deeply spiritual and moral ones (Gantt, 2005). The truly transformative process of therapy in this view entails shedding one's old self, akin to the teachings of Paul, who suggests crucifying the old self on the cross with Christ (Romans 6:1-11).

A faithful LDS perspective and, when clinically indicated, a faith-focused one, both mirrors and expands many of the elements found in the common factors of psychology. The therapeutic relationship, motivation, corrective experience, insight, empathy, and efficacy are not rejected, but are understood within a more transcendent account of persons, healing, and change. Theologically, this is understood as including cultivating a deep and profound relationship with God and fellow men, nurturing the motivation to seek the kingdom of God, pursuing more profound and truthful experiences with God and others, gaining insight into one's understanding of self, God, and others, and attaining a sense of efficacy and competence when yoked with Christ.

What sets an LDS approach apart is the profound and transcendent nature of these components; without the transcendence inherent within the worldview of the Restored Gospel, psychology's common factors are sanitized and, in some ways, stripped of their potential power for wholehearted transformation of the kind many patients seek and desperately need, and which the apostle Paul advocated. Moreover, the measure of whether a genuinely Christian therapy is "working" is far more holistic in comparison to the traditional outcome and process measurements employed in mainstream, secular psychotherapy research (see Greggo and Sisemore, 2012; Jones and Butman, 2011; Wade et al., 2007).

A genuinely LDS perspective on therapy, like a Christian approach generally, is one that encompasses an evaluation of the very essence of the person one aims to become. This involves assessing

[2]The precise list of "common factors" vary from scholar to scholar (Elkins, 2019); however, the most well-researched and significantly impactful common factor is the therapeutic alliance or relationship (Flückiger et al., 2018; Horvath et al., 2011).

the quality of one's interactions with others, their psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being, as well as their capacity to navigate and find meaning in trials and suffering, among other things.

While this is certainly a topic worth further discussion, we'd like to focus our analysis on the second reason psychology cannot provide lasting and profound healing. That is, psychology is not built upon the foundation of Christlike compassion which necessitates both genuine charity and truth-telling.

Assumptions of Naturalism and Secular Humanism

Beyond the matter of how a faithful LDS perspective on therapy might call into question symptom reduction as a "stand-in" for therapeutic efficacy, and how it might offer both a broader and deeper understanding of the proper aims of the therapeutic endeavor, there is a second important reason that contemporary, secular approaches to therapy cannot provide the sort of lasting, truly transformative, and profoundly healing that is needed in this modern era of malaise (Gantt, 2005). Perhaps the most salient, at least to the present analysis, is the simple fact that contemporary psychotherapeutic theory and practice, as fundamentally secular enterprises, are not built upon the foundation of Christlike compassion which necessitates both genuine charity and truth-telling. In other words, being rooted in naturalism and secular humanism, contemporary psychology lacks the moral and spiritual underpinnings that are necessary for genuine healing—i.e., emotional, relational, and spiritual wholeness.

To ignore significant facets of human existence and experience such as "spiritual realism" (Wright, 2013), moral agency, and transcendent truth in the process of healing necessarily limits the scope of healing and, thereby, leaves psychology incapable of providing needed resources for the sort of genuine healing that it might otherwise be able to offer. Unfortunately, because contemporary psychological theory and practice are so often grounded in the philosophical traditions of naturalism, secular humanism, and scientism, professional neglect of (if not open hostility to) such things is commonplace.

Broadly defined, naturalism is the idea that all reality is ultimately material governed by self-existent universal, objective, and mechanical laws manifest as forces acting on material entities (Goetz and Taliaferro, 2008). As such, researchers that assume naturalism overly narrow their scope of study to physically measurable phenomena (Gantt and Williams, 2020; Gantt et al., 2021). Secular humanism assumes human beings can lead meaningful, ethical lives without the need for any transcendent beliefs or grounding, relying instead on human reason and individual autonomy (Harrison, 2024). In a therapeutic setting, humanistic therapies rely on unconditional positive regard, radical acceptance/support, and relativism for healing (see, e.g., Ellis, 1992; Fowers, 2010; Rogers, 1951; Wells and Burr, 2000). Neither naturalism nor secular humanism allow for serious consideration or inclusion of the moral and spiritual realities of human life in psychotherapy, realities that, from an LDS perspective, are ultimately the most important and defining aspects of human life.

Because secular humanism and naturalism, and therefore much of contemporary psychology, are not grounded in a holistic reality of what and who human beings actually are, the discipline does not have the resources necessary to provide holistic and profound healing of the sort required to provide relief from, solace in, or a viable path out of our present societal and moral malaise. Ultimately, while naturalism and secular humanism may have gotten us into this mess, so to speak, they are entirely inadequate to the task of getting us out. The Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ, on the other hand, with its commitment to truth-telling, compassion, human agency, and moral concern, provides more than ample resources, both spiritual and intellectual, for the kind of soul-care and soul-healing that is impossible with contemporary psychotherapies.

Furthermore, despite common caricatures employed by secular critics that depict Christian approaches to therapy as inherently rooted in condemnation or shame (see, e.g., Downie, 2022; Jasko, 2022; Venn-Brown, 2015), LDS (and many other Christian) teachings actually require that the truth-telling and empathic work of therapy be motivated entirely by compassion, grace, and charity,

or the "pure love of Christ" (Moroni 7:47).

Latter-day Saint Christianity as the Solution

The essence of Latter-day Saint Christian teachings is deeply rooted in the interwoven principles of truth and love, as outlined in both ancient and modern scripture. These two principles, far from being separate or distinct, are inseparably connected, each preserving the profound significance of the other. In the New Testament, for example, we find the apostle John portraying Christ as the truth of God's loving graciousness (and gracious love) when he writes, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). "Suppose we take that claim [that Christ is the truth made flesh] quite seriously," LDS philosopher James Faulconer (2012) suggests, "then the path and the truth and the force of life are the same thing in Jesus" (p. 80).

In the Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul teaches that we come to a "unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" only by "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:13-15). Most importantly, Jesus Himself emphatically declared "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Echoing this, Alma taught his son Shiblon, "There is no other way or means whereby man can be saved, only in and through Christ. Behold, he is the life and the light of the world. Behold, he is the word of truth and righteousness" (Alma 38:9).

In both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, the intimate relationship that inheres between love and truth is made clear in the teaching that "charity is the pure love of Christ" (Moroni 7:47) and, as such, "it rejoiceth in the truth" (Moroni 7:45). In the First Epistle of John, we learn that not only is God truth, but also that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Illustrating this transcendentally beautiful reality, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (2016) has taught that "the first great commandment of all eternity is to love God with all our heart, might, mind, and strength – that's the first great commandment. But the first great truth of all eternity is that God loves us with all of His heart, might, mind, and strength" (emphasis in the original). When understood in this way it becomes clear that Jesus is not just a messenger of truth or an example of love, but rather the very embodiment of truth and love as one whole and perfect being (Thayne and Gantt, 2019).

It is in this way that we can see truth and love are not individual and distinct principles or doctrinal tenets of the gospel of Christ, but rather that they are necessarily intertwined and must always be understood together lest they lose their meaning and power entirely. The synergy between truth and love is eloquently articulated in Paul's teachings to the Ephesians (4:7, 11-16) where he highlights the importance of the grace bestowed upon each individual by Christ and the diverse roles within the body of believers. He articulates that the purpose of these roles is the maturation of the saints and the edification of the body of Christ, striving for unity in faith and knowledge of the Son of God. Paul cautions the Ephesians against being swayed by varying doctrines and exhorts, "But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). This passage underscores that while truth is essential for spiritual growth, it must be rooted in the embrace of love in order to ultimately lead humanity to Christ. Christ Himself underscores the intrinsic connection between love and truth, affirming, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Here, He implies that obedience to His teachings is the embodiment of love, illustrating that love and truth are inextricably linked in Christian faith.

Conversely, much of psychology aims to remedy the malaise of our modern world by focusing on what is commonly thought to be love, or what is variously referred to in the professional literature as "unconditional positive regard," "affirmation," "non-possessive warmth," or "emotional strengthening" (see Norcross and Lambert, 2019). That is, the idea that people need to be loved and radically accepted for everything they are and want and that they each have a right to safe spaces and significant validation (Gantt and Thayne, 2017). It is by providing such regard that many psychologists and theorists believe our sick world can be healed. Even further, because of the pervasive nature of the therapeutic ethos

in our modern world, this view of love has also come to shape what many desire out of religion (see, e.g., Holmes and Burdge, 2022; Gantt and Thayne, 2017; Smith and Denton, 2009). Smith and Denton (2009) have drawn attention to the phenomenon of unconditional positive regard applied to religious practices/theology as reflecting what they have termed "Moral Therapeutic Deism." Gantt and Thayne (2017), while quoting Smith's original work, state:

> The God of this religion [Moral Therapeutic Deism] is a kind of (Rogerian) "Cosmic Therapist," a God who is "always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process" (Smith and Denton, 2009, Smith, 2005, p. 165). Such a God is by no means a demanding or commanding God. "He actually can't be," Smith says, "because his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good" (p. 165).

Anticipating this mindset over sixty years ago, C.S. Lewis (2001) wrote:

> Some conceptions of the Divine goodness which tend to dominate our thought, though seldom expressed in so many words, are open to criticism. By the goodness of God we mean nowadays almost exclusively His lovingness; and in this we may be right. And by Love, in this context, most of us mean kindness—the desire to see others than the self happy; not happy in this way or in that, but just happy. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, "What does it matter so long as they are contented?" We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, "liked to see young people enjoying themselves" and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, "a good time was had by all". Not many people, I admit, would formulate a theology in precisely those terms: but a conception not very different lurks at the back of many minds. I do not claim to be an exception: I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear that I don't, and since I have reason to believe, nevertheless, that God is Love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction. (p. 31)

Commensurate with Lewis, Paul teaches us that there can be no Christlike love, compassion, and charity without the truth of Jesus Christ.

There can be no love without truth and no truth without love. This is because, ultimately, the truth of the Christian gospel is that we ought to be more concerned with the well-being of others than we are with our own well-being, just as Christ demonstrated. While unconditional positive regard and similar affirming approaches to therapy are easy to teach and almost always make all parties, including the therapist, feel good, doing therapy in a Christian way requires that we are more concerned about the well-being of our patients than we are about our own feeling good and comfortable. To Lewis's point, our modern therapeutic understanding of love needs correction, which is what we hope to illustrate (within a therapeutic context) in the remainder of this piece.

Christian Principles in a Therapeutic Context: Becoming Disciple-Clinicians

Ultimately, to appropriately integrate Christian teachings in a therapeutic framework, therapists must first be committed disciples of Christ. A disciple of Christ is not merely a follower but a dedicated student of Jesus, committed to embodying His teachings and emulating His character in all of one's actions and interactions. Being a "disciple-clinician" demands that as therapists we love and value others as Christ loves and values them, responding to them with Christ-like compassion, and prioritizing their well-being as Christ would. Such an approach requires thera-

pists to strive to understand and treat individuals as God intends, seeking to act in their best interest, whether they are one's patients or not. This constitutes a foundational commitment even if it means being disliked or misunderstood, as Christ Himself often was: "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem" (Isaiah 53:3, NIV).

More specifically, in the therapeutic context, we believe that becoming a genuinely faithful disciple-clinician involves at least three essential features: (1) developing sensitivity to truth and love, (2) consistently telling the truth, and (3) capitalizing on and fostering the innate spiritual and moral sensitivities of patients.

Developing Sensitivity to Truth and Love

> "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son." (Hebrews 12:5-6, NIV)

One of the basic ways in which we can become disciple-clinicians is to cultivate a deep sensitivity to both truth and love. This involves living in accordance with truth by demonstrating genuine, Christ-like love for others. Living truthfully and loving others truly means seeing people as they really are and as God sees and knows them. We have been taught to understand how God sees our fellow human beings in various biblical verses:

- "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).
- "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Psalm 139:13-14, NIV).
- "He doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him. Wherefore, he commandeth none that they shall not partake of his salvation" (2 Nephi 26:24).
- "And the great God has had mercy on us, and made these things known unto us that we might not perish; yea, and he has made these things known unto us beforehand, because he loveth our souls as well as he loveth our children; therefore, in his mercy he doth visit us by his angels, that the plan of salvation might be made known unto us as well as unto future generations" (Alma 24:14).
- "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).
- "For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee" (Isaiah 54:10).
- "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Seeing people this way—as loved enough for God to send His Son, as children of God, as made in God's image, and as fearfully and wonderfully made by God, as ever worthy of His life and sacrifice—allows us to see and know others as actual persons worthy of love and capable of change, and not as objects, mere manifestations of diagnostic categories, or as passive victims of mysterious causal forces and traumatic conditions.

We do this best when we recognize that people have a lot more going on behind-the-scenes, so to speak, and look beyond the "masks" that many people wear out into the world, seeing beyond their behaviors and defenses such that we come to understand the deeper, often hidden, transcendent/existential aspects of their life and its meanings. We also come to recognize that as therapists we exist for their sake, for their well-being, both as professionals and brothers and sisters in Christ. This principle is taught repeatedly and clearly in scripture:

- "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (Philippians 2:3-4).
- "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13).
- "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16).
- "But ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another. And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish" (Mosiah 4:15-16).

Clearly, genuine care for and love of others is a central teaching of the Gospel of Christ, and thus, we would argue, a basic expectation of any disciple-clinician seeking to honor God and bless the lives of His children as a counseling professional. There are several ways in which we can be disciple-clinicians who are sensitive to truth and love; namely, by (1) filling our minds with truth from faithful and rigorous sources, (2) by seeking God's guidance as we do therapy, and (3) purposefully and intentionally developing Christlike love and compassion for everyone we encounter.

Filling Our Minds with Truth Becoming a disciple-clinician who is sensitive to truth and love requires that we fill our minds with truth from faithful and rigorous sources. One such obvious resource is scripture and the teachings of prophets, seers, and revelators. However, we must do more than this for the impact of scripture to be both truthful and rigorous. We must put in the time and energy necessary to truly study, ponder, and meditate on scripture. As articulated in 2 Timothy 2:15, we must "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

We can do this by examining word usage and etymology, studying scripture in its historical and literary context, attending to the patterns of teachings in scripture, asking questions and comparing alternative readings, and more (see, e.g., Bailey, 2008; Bauer and Traina, 2011; Faulconer, 1999; Klein et al., 2017; Richards and O'Brien, 2012). Scriptures should also be studied in prayerful dialogue with the Savior so that we understand what the Lord would have us learn from our studies. It is by studying scripture rigorously that we can align ourselves with the truth of the gospel as God provided it to us and continually have our own preconceived and often false notions about life and truth challenged, expanded, and edified.

Moreover, recognizing other writings born out of faithful scholarship and a desire to stand as a witness of the truth can supplement scriptural study and provide guidance in how to think through a number of challenging issues in psychology and psychotherapy. There are far too many sources that qualify to name even a small subset of them all here but some examples would include C.S. Lewis (2002) *Mere Christianity*, Jones and Butman (2011) *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*, M. L. Cunnoe (2022) *The Person in Psychology and Christianity*, Abigail Favale (2022) *The Genesis of Gender*, Alan Noble (2021) *You Are Not Your Own*, Wilkens and Sanford (2009) *Hidden Worldviews*, Marilynne Robinson (2010) *Absence of Mind*, Carl Trueman (2020) *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, David Bentley Hart (2024) *All Things are Full of Gods*, and C. Terry Warner (2001) *Bonds That Make Us Free*, among many others.

Staying grounded in the scriptures and "the best books" center our minds on the gospel of Christ which enables us to discern and integrate faithful and rigorous sources of truth because we will recognize when information, principles, and teachings align with Scripture and, most importantly, when they do not. Understanding the philosophical (and even theological) underpinnings of psychological theories and practices, and their alignment or dis-alignment, with scriptural teaching is vital in the discernment process. As Paul

and Timothy warned the early saints in 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" (Colossians 2:8). Furthermore, living out the principles we learn about through careful, reflective and prayerful scripture study helps us maintain a truthful and loving relationship not only with God but also with others, particularly our patients.

Seeking God's Guidance Seeking God's guidance while doing therapy is of paramount importance. This involves praying for patients, developing discernment between truth and falsity, and being receptive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit during sessions. All of these actions are ultimately part of the gift of discernment. In the June 2018 edition of the *New Era* (New Era, 2018, "What is the gift of discernment?"), discernment is articulated as follows:

> The scriptures talk about the "discerning of spirits" as a gift of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:10; D&C 46:23). It means "to understand or know something through the power of the Spirit. . . . It includes perceiving the true character of people and the source and meaning of spiritual manifestations" (Guide to the Scriptures, "Discernment, Gift of," scriptures.lds.org). Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught that the gift of discernment can help us (1) "detect hidden error and evil in others," (2) "detect hidden errors and evil in ourselves," (3) "find and bring forth the good that may be concealed in others," and (4) "find and bring forth the good that may be concealed in us" ("Quick to Observe," Ensign, Dec. 2006, 35).

The ability to "detect hidden error and evil" in oneself and others, as well as to "find and bring forth the good" in others, is deeply relevant to the work of an LDS therapist. In therapy, discernment includes the humility to recognize one's own distortions, assumptions, or self-protective reactions, while also seeking to see the patient truthfully before God. It also includes the ability to notice, name, and invite forth the good in patients, even when that good may not yet be the dominant force in their lives. In this sense, discernment is not merely the ability to identify what is wrong, distorted, false, or self-deceived. It is also the spiritually informed capacity to perceive what is good, true, agentic, and responsive in the patient and to help call that forth with wisdom and love.

This might mean naming a patient's courage, tenderness, honesty, longing for goodness, capacity for repentance, or desire to love well, even when those qualities are still emerging or inconsistently lived. Such discernment allows the therapist to see more truthfully and to respond in a way that is aligned with God's love for the patient.

Because of this, it is crucial to have both humility and confidence in the Lord. Therapists often do not know, on their own, what patients most need in a given moment. However, by remaining teachable and trusting in the wisdom and love of God, therapists can have confidence that God knows what is best for both them and their patients. Thus, developing spiritual sensitivity is vital to ensuring that therapists can navigate the complex and tender situations they face with patients with divine insight and act as instruments of God's will and healing grace. As James 1:5 reminds us: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." Likewise, Alma taught his son Helaman that "whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions, and shall be lifted up at the last day" (Alma 36:3).

Continually seeking God's guidance in therapeutic endeavors is pivotal for fostering trust in the therapeutic relationship, ensuring that patients perceive and experience therapists as consistently truthful, genuinely loving, and competent. Therapists can only do what is needed in therapy most effectively and properly as they seek to embody Christlike discipleship holistically, not only in their professional role but in their personal and professional lives more broadly. In essence, therapists must strive to live the very principle they invite patients to consider—that is, prioritizing the well-being of others, advocating for the sig-

nificance of doing so, and supporting those who are endeavoring to embrace and understand this Christlike approach to living.

As therapists strive to embody Christlike love and truth, they bring this ethos into therapy by focusing intently on what is best for their patients while remaining attuned to the Spirit's loving guidance in truth. Being led by the Spirit involves listening to promptings and courageously acting on them, even when doing so feels challenging or risks straining the therapeutic relationship. It constitutes developing the type of discernment Christ exemplified both when He perceived the unspoken longing of the Nephite multitude and responded with compassion (3 Nephi 17:5–6), and when He perceived the thoughts of the scribes and responded truthfully to what they had not spoken aloud (Mark 2:8).

Ultimately, seeking God's guidance acknowledges that patients are God's children and that He knows best how to aid them. Relying on God's wisdom positions the therapist to better serve the patient because it allows the therapist to move beyond individual judgment and education alone in order to prioritize divine insight and service to the patient. Of course, as noted above, it is imperative that therapists develop a strong sense of spiritual discernment and faithful trust in order to distinguish between fleeting impulses and genuine spiritual promptings. As with finely honed professional skills and depthful academic understanding, spiritual discernment cannot be mastered without serious effort, discipline, and repeated confirmatory experience.

Developing Christlike Love and Compassion for Everyone Finally, it is important to develop Christlike love for everyone we encounter, in or outside the therapy office. It requires seeing others as God sees them, the same way He sees us—compassionately within our context and understanding of our real and unique identity and experience. But because Christlike love is not simply about experiencing a particular emotional state or momentary feeling, it must be developed through service and compassion-oriented actions; that is, by purposefully and intentionally seeking to act in the best interest of others, out of a genuine concern for their welfare and benefit. Christlike love can precede such acts of service but often we grow to love others as Christ loves us when we serve others the way that Christ serves us, putting our concerns for the welfare of others above ourselves, and embodying the sacrificial love Christ embodied. Truly compassionate service involves being fully present, listening actively, and showing sincere and honest regard for the other in both words and actions. This approach fosters authentic, earnest connections, making the therapeutic relationship vibrantly collaborative and deeply human.

Developing Christlike love requires us to see people as "the other" rather than seeing them as object-like, manifestations of the operations of abstract diagnostic categories, or as a "variable machine" (Brinkmann, 2023); that is, as a thing—albeit a very complex, unique sort of thing—to be acted upon or which acts upon us. This perspective has been well-articulated by French Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, who endured the atrocities of World War II. He has stated:

> The Other as Other is not only an alter ego [or another version of ourselves]: the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because of the Other's character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other's very alterity. . . . It can be said that the intersubjective space is not symmetrical. . . . The relationship with alterity is neither spatial nor conceptual. . . . Does not the essential difference between charity and justice come from the preference of charity for the other, even when, from the point of view of justice, no preference is any longer possible? (Levinas, 1987, pp. 83-84)

In encountering the face of another person, we are immediately invested with moral responsibility for them, for our actions, our intentions, and our very being-in-the-world. And from Levinas's perspective, charity is only truly charity when such is simply offered to the other because of his or her status as "other," i.e., he or she is not me. "[T]he relation to the face is straightaway ethical," Levinas (1985, p. 87) writes, "The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose meaning

consists in saying: 'thou shalt not kill'." For Levinas, the Face denotes not simply the empirical visage of another that we observe with our eyes, but rather a phenomenological event, the moment when we experience the otherness of the other, find ourselves interrupted by the stunningly excessive humanness of the other as other (Levinas, 1969, 1985).

When we come face-to-face with another person we experience them as fully human and other than, and in this experience it becomes clear that we are responsible to know, love, and serve them, and in so doing offer response for our actions and inactions, for our inhumanity and egoism. This requires seeing others not as objects but as real people with their own stories, struggles, and intrinsic, infinite worth. We see the other as other when we confront the reality that they are human, prior to and beyond any conceptual, societal, or psychological labels we might tend to apply to them for our own purposes. The other is not a category of person, not an object of egoistic cognition, or stimulus configuration that elicits reflexive responses in us, but rather is a human being who lives, breathes, fears, hungers, suffers, worries, dreams, feels, struggles, and pleads for respite and respect.

Martin Buber (1996) also wrote at length about this relational encounter with the other, suggesting that there are ways of living in which we see and treat others as objects for our use—what he termed the "I-It" mode—and ways of living in which we see and treat others as the fully human beings they are, beings whose lives and experiences are just as real and important as our own. This mode of being-with he termed the "I-Thou" or "I-You" mode.

According to Buber, we engage an "I-Thou" way of being in the world when we serve another, and purposefully and intentionally engage with them compassionately and respectfully. To honestly be of service to an-other fundamentally requires that we focus on the other and on doing, or perhaps most poignantly, being what is best for them (Levinas, 1985, i.e., "being-for-the other;"). Genuinely loving service, however, does not manifest in only one particular way. Importantly, it does not consist of what a sort of "cheap" or "easy" Christianity might prescribe—that to love another means only that we are always nice, affirming, and unconditionally accepting of them. Granted, intentional and purposeful service may at times look like ordinary, commonplace "niceness"—i.e., saying and doing things that the other person wants and that make the other person happy and comfortable.

More holistically and specifically within the therapeutic relationship, Christlike compassionate, purposeful, and intentional service in the other's best interest often takes the form of attentive, critical listening and a willingness to communicate truth—both easy and hard truth. Christlike compassion involves not only showing honest interest and sincere respect for the other and their experiences, which may include helping the other feel safe and comfortable, but also recognizing their responsibility to yet others and holding them accountable to that responsibility. While this may not always provide the warm and fuzzy feelings that some may want from therapy, or even seek in Christianity, this kind of other-focused service—genuinely doing what is in the best interest of the other whether or not they like you for it or accept the truth you communicate—respects and values the patient for who they are and what they are genuinely capable of as a human being.

Indeed, Christlike compassion in the therapeutic setting refuses to infantilize the other by consigning them to perpetual dependency, fragility, or victimhood. Rather, it invites them to the truth that as beloved children of God they can handle difficult truths, shoulder accountability, and actively work toward meaningful personal, interpersonal, and moral change. Therapy conducted at this level of moral engagement also invites patients to see themselves as truly valuable and worth engaging, rather than as a defective object who is boring the therapist, wasting time, or incapable of living a truly full and human life.

Clinically, Christlike love is about serving, about compassion (lit., "suffering-with"), about being fully present with and for the patient. Such compassionate love can take a variety of forms. At times, the most compassionate thing one can do as a therapist is to simply sit with a patient while he or she talks and the therapist says nothing, striving to be as hospitable and welcoming as possible, open to the patient as other. At other times, there

may be silence amongst all parties or the therapist and patient may cry together. And, at yet other times, it may be necessary to confront delusion, manipulation, falsity and self-deception, speaking with "boldness, but not overbearance" (Alma 38:12) by way of an invitation for the patient to be truthful by choosing to live truthfully and shoulder their own moral responsibility to others.[3]

When therapists relate to their patients in this compassionate and present way, especially in a consistent and authentic manner, they are able to establish rapport and truly human relationships with their patients. Furthermore, the relationship becomes radically collaborative as therapists actively value and consider the knowledge and understanding the patient has in his or her own life, even when it challenges or questions our own prior understandings, personal and professional projects, or conceptual commitments. It becomes possible to work intimately together with an-other toward healing; that is, toward the sort of divine, pervasive, world-altering transformative change that comes only through divine channels and relational receptivity to the Spirit of God. Such is, in fact, the only sort of healing that can mend the souls and sufferings of both patient and therapist. Engaging with patients in Christlike compassion and the spirit of love, when received in that same spirit, leaves the patient with a clear understanding that the therapist is there with and for him or her, and that the therapist is honored that the patient has shared him- or herself with the therapist.

An approach such as this recognizes the genuine and holistic personhood of both the therapist and the patient such that both parties can see one another as other, as real people, living, vibrant, infinite and deep. Other approaches, however, all too often encourage the establishment of a strict therapist/client relationship with proscribed and rigid boundaries, where the therapist is not permitted to transgress professional "best practices" and the strictures of "empirically supported treatment" regimes to allow the intimate, moral possibilities of such a relationship to be explored and unfold. Such professional principles conceptualize the therapist-patient relationship in essentially adversarial terms, assuming that the patient cannot fully trust the therapist to love and care about them enough to be truthful with them and sit with them in their pain. This may lead them to guard themselves from fully opening themselves up vulnerably and disclose the things with which they need help.

While we want to be clear that we are not arguing against the engagement of best ethical practices—after all, we are arguing that at every moment, the therapist is always striving to act in the best interest of his or her patients and a therapist that does any less is at risk of harming patients—there are certain professional conventions about what is acceptable or not acceptable within therapeutic practice that we believe can hinder genuine Christlike relationship between patient and therapist. One such example is that of self-disclosure.

There are several schools of thought within psychotherapy that argue against significant or even minimal disclosure from the therapist about his or her life, internal world, relationships, etc. From these perspectives, if a patient were to ask the therapist their relationship status ("Are you married?"), their religious affiliation ("Are you Christian too?"), or if they've experienced something similar to the patient ("Have you ever felt so crippled by anxiety about something in your life?"), the "proper" answer might be something like, "I'm curious why you're asking that question?" or "What kind of answer are you hoping to hear from me?"

While these questions are not inherently bad in the slightest—in fact the authors have asked these very questions of patients from time to time—being content with redirecting the conversation entirely back to the patient under the guise of "professionalism" limits our ability to genuinely be for the sake of our patients. This is also, of course, the case if a therapist were to begin to self-disclose for self-focused purposes (e.g., disclosing such for the purpose of getting personal support from the patient). However, we suggest that

[3]For example, Levinas (1989) has said: "The other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you're for the other, you're for the neighbour. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong" (p. 294).

the particular circumstances and experiences we have had in our lives as therapists have likely been bestowed upon us such that we can extend deep compassion to our patients. In each of the questions above (barring patients who may be predatory or manipulative—and such is typically easy to spot), a therapist based in Christlike love ought to hear cries of "Do you understand me? Can you really help me? Will you lead me astray?" as opposed to a mal-intended intrusion into the facade of perfect unconditional positive regard and professionalism. For a patient, knowing that his or her therapist cares about him or her deeply and is willing to get into the trenches alongside him or her, so to speak, is exactly the kind of Christlike love we are calling Christian therapists to and will create the kind of relationship that is actually healing.

Consistently Telling Our Patients the Truth

A second basic way in which we can readily apply the gospel principles of compassion/charity and being truthful is by straightforwardly telling patients the truth and challenging the lies they believe and false and falsifying ways of being-in-the-world they have come to embrace—i.e., lies they believe about themselves and subsequently live out in their relationships with others (and with God). This may be easier to see in cases where the gospel clearly calls us to discern between truth and error, even when those matters are not easy to address therapeutically. This may be the case with morally serious and often controversial issues such as infidelity, lying, abortion, pornography, illicit drug use, etc. For example, helping an unapologetic patient realize that cheating on his or her spouse is wrong is something most committed Christian psychologists would find to be a fairly straightforward requirement for bringing about gospel-centered therapeutic aims.

However, a therapist's obligation to tell his or her patients the truth is not limited to these more obvious or morally charged situations. More often, truthful compassion will require therapists to speak truth in the often seemingly "low-stakes" areas of patients' everyday lives, those spaces in which they learn and grow daily into the particular kind of people they are and are becoming. This may include the excuses they make, the resentments they justify, the ways they avoid responsibility, the stories they tell about themselves and others, the injuries they refuse to repair, or the small dishonesties by which they preserve a false way of being. Thus, consistently telling patients the truth does not mean only naming obviously sinful or destructive behavior when it appears (and when moved upon by the Spirit). It means being moved by charity and, when guided by the Spirit, helping patients see and relinquish the falsehoods they are living by, even when those falsehoods appear ordinary, socially acceptable, or therapeutically easy to affirm.

For example, one issue that often requires addressing therapeutically in the spirit of love and truth is a patient's attempts at impression management (Frühauf et al., 2015). Impression management is essentially presenting oneself in a particular way to create a certain desired impression on others, typically to manipulatively, even if unintentionally, elicit a particular response from others in order to garner respect, sympathy, moral support, pity, or envy and esteem. A patient may find themselves in a therapy session monitoring their therapist's "micro-expressions," for example, so as to ascertain and give the therapist the "the right answer" to questions that are asked in hopes that the therapist will be more interested in them, value them more, or perhaps come to like them more than other patients the therapist is seeing.

The problem here is, of course, that the patient becomes fixated on pleasing the therapist rather than focused on their own work that needs to be done, and thereby impeding their own progress in therapy, halting growth and authenticity in the therapeutic relationship. In such cases, the therapist needs to be willing to lovingly point out that such image management is taking place, that it is counterproductive, and invite the patient to collaborate in recognizing and exploring the intentions and meanings that undergird attempts at image management. Further, the therapist should explain the moral, interpersonal, and, when appropriate, spiritual dangers of engaging in such strategies, highlighting not only that therapeutic progress ceases when both therapist and patient are operating on false pretenses, but also that our capacity to live fully in truth and love is stymied and stunted when we create false images for our-

selves and others to worship.

In other words, the therapist must invite the patient to understand the essential nature that truth, humility, and honesty must play in the therapeutic relationship if real healing is to occur and genuine wholeness to be found. As discussed above, as we strive to become the sorts of persons who are always seeking to serve others with Christlike compassion, even difficult, painful truth can be acknowledged and honored in love and with proper timing for each individual patient, allowing them to be called to engage the world and others in a higher, holier, and more truthful way.

Fostering the Innate Spiritual and Moral Sensitivities of Patients

Finally, as disciple-clinicians we can capitalize on and encourage the innate spiritual and moral sensitivities of our patients already always experience by not only recognizing the light of Christ in them, that "Spirit [which] giveth light to every man that cometh into the world" (D&C 84:46), but also by helping them (in whatever way and in whatever language is available for them) to also recognize the "whisperings of the spirit" in their own lives and relationships. Because patients are children of God, made in His image and endowed with divine nature (Genesis 1:26–27; Moses 2:26–27), they are not morally inert beings. Rather, they possess a nature capable of recognizing goodness, sensing moral obligation, and desiring to do what is right. Patients may resist, distort, or misunderstand these sensitivities, but they nonetheless come to therapy with moral questions and speak in morality-laden language.

As prolific couple and family therapist and professor William Doherty (2022, p. 9) states, "because clients don't separate the psychological and ethical aspects of their lives—'What am I feeling' is not separated from 'What should I do?'—we owe it to them to become more skilled at ethical consultation." Similarly, Cushman (1995, p. 295) argues that "It is the job of the psychotherapist to demonstrate the existence of a world constituted by different rules and to encourage patients to be aware of available moral traditions that oppose the moral frame by which they presently shape their lives."

We believe that as LDS therapists seeking to be disciple-clinicians it is vital to the relational healing processes of therapy that we encourage our patients to consider seriously the spiritual and moral resources they already possess, but have likely been ignoring or muting, to both "think and feel anew" the emotional, moral, and relational conundrums that have brought them to therapy in the first place. In so doing, we can open a space in the therapeutic relationship for acknowledging and exploring what Williams and Gantt (2012), drawing on the work of C. Terry Warner (1987, 2001), identify as our "felt moral obligation," or that basic understanding of right and wrong, that sense of "oughtness" regarding how we should be with and towards others in particular settings—a concept that is in some important ways reflective of (or, at least, reminiscent of) gospel teachings regarding the light of Christ and the promptings of the Holy Ghost.

Indeed, as Tjeltveit (2004, p. 158) observes, if a meaningful therapeutic alliance is to be established by having therapist and patient truly collaborate "in determining therapy goals, then therapists must take very seriously client obligations, which form one aspect of the ethical context of psychotherapy."

It is important to note here that an extensive and penetrating literature exists demonstrating that not only is therapy an inescapably value-laden endeavor but also that therapists have a professional obligation to highlight the moral assumptions and language by which patients are making sense of their world and relationships in order to help patients better understand the implications of their decisions (see, e.g., Holmes and Lindley, 2018; Martin, 2006; Slife et al., 2019; Tjeltveit, 1999, 2016; Trachsel et al., 2021; Waring, 2016). As Tjeltveit (2004, p. 149) notes:

> therapists and clients bring to therapy a variety of (usually implicit) ethical emotions, perceptions, behaviors, and convictions that profoundly shape any therapeutic relationship. Indeed, the very nature of contemporary psychotherapy, as practiced, reflects certain ethical assumptions. Because psychotherapy is thus an inextricably ethical endeavor, a full understanding of it requires that one see

therapy in its ethical contexts.

Thus, just as we should not brush past our patients' mentions of moral feelings or "promptings," neither should we discourage them from experiencing or exploring such feelings.

For example, from a Gospel-centered perspective, a therapist should not discourage a patient from feeling guilty about cheating on his pregnant wife, or dismiss such feelings as arbitrary or unhealthy, even if the patient says he personally values his right to seek sexual fulfillment in whatever way and whenever he desires it. Regarding engaging in moral consultation or dialogue with patients in therapy, Doherty (2022, p. 9) states:

> To engage in moral consultation, therapists do not have to dictate moral rules or claim to have all the answers. Rather, our role is not so different from how sociologist Alan Wolfe (1989) described the role of the social scientist when dealing with moral issues: "to locate a sense of moral obligation in common sense, ordinary emotions, and everyday life. . . . to help individuals discover and apply for themselves the moral rules they already, as social beings, possess (pp. 214–215)."

Further, Doherty explores how one might affirm patients' ethical feelings:

> In general, ethical affirmations are simple interventions, not complex ones. They have to come spontaneously in the moment and from the therapist's heart, or otherwise, they will sound patronizing. . . . Sometimes an affirmation can be quite brief, as when the mother in a family arrived a couple of minutes late for a family therapy session and said, "I'm sorry I am late. I was taking care of my mother. As you know, she's dying and in hospice. . . She was not the best mother in the world, but I feel an obligation to be there for her as she's dying." My response was, "Of course you do," a simple affirmation of her sense of moral obligation. (Doherty, 2022, p. 45)

Doherty (2022) later presents a model for moral consultation in therapy that he calls "the LEAP-C model." This is one possible model that could prove helpful for LDS therapists in learning to "speak the truth in love" amid the challenges and complexities of therapeutic engagement. However, whether this particular model is employed or not, the central point here is that therapists ought not brush past, ignore, or immediately pathologize the patient's experience and expression of moral feelings (i.e., whether a sense of guilt and shame or a sense of "ought" and "should"), nor should they discourage them from acknowledging and exploring such things; for example, by suggesting that the patient need never feel guilty as long as their actions are congruent with their stated values. Indeed, the patient's moral sense can be indicative of their awareness of their own moral impact on others and, thus, ought to be cultivated for their benefit and the benefit of those around them.

An essential part of fostering and nurturing a patient's inherent moral sensitivities is being willing to engage in a line of questioning and exploration that helps patients come to understand the moral implications of their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. In so doing, we can gently guide and encourage reflection that allows our patients to come to their own understanding of the impact they have on others, in various ways and for both good and ill, and thereby invite them to seek after and exercise Christlike love, putting others and their needs before themselves. An essential part of fostering and evoking our patients' inherent moral sensitivities and helping expose them to a more truthful world is asking good, penetrating questions that induce honest self-reflection.

Although not a psychotherapist, we would do well to take a cue from Søren Kierkegaard, the 19th Century Christian Philosopher and oft-cited father of existential thought (Austin, 2013). In his book, *Søren Kierkegaard's Christian Psychology: Insights for Counseling and Pastoral Care*, C. Stephen Evans (1990, p. 117) discussed Kierkegaard's use of Socratic questioning, a common intervention in cognitive behavioral therapy (Neenan, 2009):

> Kierkegaard's indirect method for helping his contemporaries is modeled on Socrates. Socrates described himself as a midwife, who had no wisdom of his own to impart but saw it as his task to help others give birth to their own ideas. In this view Socrates did not see himself as superior to anyone else, but was essentially equal to those he hoped to teach. Consistent with this stance, Socrates adopted a method of critical questioning. When he encountered a politician who claimed to know what was right and just, he did not begin by telling the fellow he was wrong and proceeding to give him a better theory. Rather, he took the person's word for it and, on the assumption that the politician did indeed know about justice, began to question him. The end result, of course, was that the politician got an inkling that he did not understand what he was talking about. He was reduced from 'knowledge' to ignorance, but in recognizing his ignorance lay the beginning of wisdom. Socrates' image of a midwife could be described as the maieutic ideal, the term 'maieutic' being drawn from the Greek word for a midwife. Kierkegaard believed strongly in the maieutic ideal.

Asking probing, evocative questions of this sort are an important feature of ethically and relationally-focused therapy because they facilitate a genuinely collaborative relationship between therapist and patient, one which honors the responsibility the patient has not only for his or her own life, but also for moral response to and in the lives of others. Furthermore, seriously entertaining these sorts of questions in therapy allows the patient to step-back a moment and take time to think through their beliefs, feelings, and behaviors and come to some conclusions about themselves that they can take full responsibility for—as opposed to having all of their attitudes, choices, meanings, and behaviors dictated for them by an outside party. In fact, put another way, this method of Socratic questioning ensures that it is ultimately the patient's responsibility and knowledge that dictates what he or she ought to do, without asserting the therapist has any superior or specific knowledge of the particular people and obligations the patient faces.

While therapy rooted in Christian love and a commitment to truth-telling should never rely solely on the therapist dictating to patients what they ought to do or how they ought to be, there are ways in which a therapist can firmly and resolutely offer a more loving and truthful perspective for patients' thoughtful and serious consideration. Doherty (2022), for example, provides an insightful real-world example of how a therapist might walk alongside a patient with Christlike compassion by both asking the right questions at the right time and in the right way and by providing genuine and truthful insights on the patient's situation—what he calls challenging his patient on "ethical terms:"

> My clinical turning point came with a client I will call Bruce, a 40ish-yearold man whose wife, Elaine, had just ended their marriage. I had worked with them as a couple in the past. Bruce returned from work one day to find that Elaine had tossed his belongings into his car and changed the locks on the house. Overwhelmed and depressed, Bruce called me for a session. When we met, he told me he couldn't face the thought of going back to his house to pick up his children, a 3-year-old and a 6-year-old, for a visit. Even more intolerable was the prospect of returning alone to his small apartment after bringing them back to their mother. Tearfully, he said that he could not interact with Elaine after what she had done to him, although he still loved her and wanted to salvage their marriage. To compound matters, he had been fired from his job because he had not been showing up at work.
>
> The more Bruce talked, the more he began to sprinkle in comments such as, "Maybe the kids would be

better off if I just stayed away," and "I think I might need a complete break; maybe I should just pack up and move far away. There is nothing keeping me here now." In fact, a decade earlier, Bruce had given up contact with a child he had fathered with a woman he did not marry. Now that he had no job, the prospect of "starting all over somewhere else" was appealing to him.

I felt dismayed when he talked about abandoning his children, but my training had only equipped me with responses such as, "What do you need to do for yourself right now to get through this?" The most challenging statements from the traditional therapy paradigm I could offer a client like Bruce would be something such as, "I wonder whether you have considered the regret you will feel if you take yourself out of your children's lives," or "You may not be in a healthy enough frame of mind right now to make long-term decisions." There is nothing wrong with these statements; I used them in my conversation with Bruce. But I also decided to do something decidedly nontraditional: to challenge him in ethical terms. After listening to his pain over the end of his marriage and his desire to start over somewhere else, I asked him the kind of question considered out of bounds in my training: "How do you think it will affect your kids if you leave their lives?" He answered, "I think it will bother them for a while, but they'll get over it before long." I moved into deeper water by saying, "I think it will affect them for a long time, not just a short time. I'm concerned about them." Bruce was listening. His reply—"I'm worried about that too, but what kind of father will I be if I am an emotional wreck?"—gave me an opening.

Throughout the conversation that ensued, I emphasized how important he was to them, even if he didn't think so right now and even if he was not emotionally at his best. I told him I could certainly understand that he might need a short time-out to collect himself before going back to his old house and facing his wife again. But he was irreplaceable to his children, and in my judgment, they would carry a lifelong emotional burden if he simply disappeared from their lives. Finally, I reminded him that his children were not responsible for the marital breakup and that it was not fair that they should be its casualties. I made these points not in the form of a lecture but as perspectives and opinions I offered as the conversation unfolded and Bruce pondered his course of action.

By both asking pertinent, evocative questions and being willing to provide insights grounded in genuine love and a commitment to truth-telling, Doherty was able to provide valuable perspective to his patient and possibly save his patient's children many years of heartache.

Alterity Focused Therapy: Another Clinical Example

Another therapeutic approach that recognizes and seeks to instantiate the central importance of Christlike love and truth-telling is Alterity Focused Therapy (see Burdge, 2000; Burdge et al., 2022, 2024; Burdge, 2024). Within this approach, patients are encouraged to live according to three key tenets or "rules" that mirror commitment to Christlike love and truth-telling: (1) Always do what is best for the other, (2) always gather more information, curiously and without judgement, and (3) live these principles, share these principles, and support others in living these principles. These tenets provide a practical grammar through which therapists and patients can move from centering therapy around self-oriented distress toward truthful, compassionate responsibility for one another.

The first rule emphasizes prioritizing and engaging action in pursuit of the long-term well-

being and interests of others. To do what is best for the other is not to please, rescue, enable, or erase oneself. It is to ask what love and truth require for the other person's long-term, even eternal, well-being.[4] At times this may require tenderness, listening, apology, sacrifice, or patient presence. At other times it may require a boundary, confrontation, discipline, or allowing consequences. The AFT therapist's role, then, is to utilize clinical skills (e.g., perspective taking, Socratic questioning, reflection, etc.) to help the patient come to realize what it means specifically to do what is best for the other people in his or her life.

The second rule encourages individuals to continuously seek and learn about others and the world around them, allowing for deeper understanding and connection.[5] Put another way, AFT encourages patients to be genuinely curious about, and not judgmental of, themselves, others, and the world. While the time for judgments always comes, good decisions—in this case, determining what is best for the other—come when one has good information and a clear perspective undistorted by self-deception, delusion, or ulterior motive. Curiosity is not moral relativism, avoidance, or an unwillingness to judge. Rather, it is the refusal to treat one's first interpretation as the whole truth and to suspend final judgment until adequate information is gathered.

Patients often enter therapy with a story that feels self-evident: what the other person meant, why the other person acted, what the other person's behavior proves, and what their own feelings finally authorize. AFT therapists, then, work to slow down that process by asking what is known, what is assumed, what has not yet been asked, and what a more truthful understanding of the other might require. Curiosity, then, or better yet, truth seeking, is preparation for more responsible judgment, action, and relating.

Finally, living by and embodying the principles of doing what is best for the other and gathering more information with curiosity rather than judgment, the third rule involves inviting individuals to be for the other and walking alongside them compassionately, both as patients and therapists. This tenet prevents compassion and truth from remaining private insight or abstract virtue language. To "live" these principles means practicing them in actual relationships. To "share" them means inviting others into the same way of being through example, honest conversation, and patient instruction. To "support" them means helping others continue in these principles when doing what is best for another becomes difficult, costly, or uncomfortable.

That is to say, a patient ought to do what is best for the others in their lives; at least, in part, by helping those others to also learn to do what is best for yet others by gathering more information and forgoing the enticements of self-deception or immoral self-justification. Healing is not complete because a patient has learned new terms for distress or has acquired a more flattering account of the self. Healing must become visible in ordinary relationships: marriages, families, friendships, congregations, workplaces, and communities.[6]

In this respect, AFT is especially consonant

[4]Secular research suggests that prosocial behavior and prosocial interventions are associated with well-being and health-related outcomes (Byrne et al., 2023; Hui et al., 2020), while empirical reviews of compassion describe it as a social and moral emotion oriented toward suffering, caregiving, and approach rather than withdrawal or self-absorption (Goetz et al., 2010). Similarly, forgiveness research suggests that movement away from resentment and toward morally serious repair can be associated with improved mental health and well-being (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018; Rasmussen et al., 2019), though forgiveness should never be confused with excusing harm or requiring unsafe reconciliation nor should it be pursued for merely the sake of the individual offering forgiveness.

[5]This tenet overlaps with empirical work on intellectual humility, perspective-taking, and nonjudgmental awareness. Reviews of intellectual humility link it to openness, learning, relational security, and prosocial dispositions (Porter et al., 2022), while work on mindfulness and emotion regulation suggests that nonjudgmental attention can help reduce reactivity and support better regulation of emotion (Guendelman et al., 2017; Hoge et al., 2021).

[6]Research on religious communities and mental health supports this communal emphasis. VanderWeele (2017) argues that communal religious participation is associated with multiple dimensions of human flourishing, including meaning, close social relationships, character, health, and life satisfaction. Similarly, systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicate that religiosity and spirituality, especially when connected to meaning, social support, and positive coping, are often associated with better mental-health outcomes (Aggarwal et al., 2023; Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Coelho-Júnior et al., 2022; Pankowski & Wytrychiewicz-Pankowska, 2023).

with LDS Christianity because moral formation within this framework is communal before it is merely individually therapeutic. One learns to love, forgive, confess, repent, serve, and endure within a community of persons who can support, correct, and sustain one another. In other words, AFT is commensurate with the idea of encouraging patients to always act out of Christlike love for others, seeking their long-term best interest, gathering and living according to truthful understanding, and encouraging others to "Go, and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:37).

While there is currently no direct literature assessing the effectiveness of AFT specifically, there is quite a bit of literature that provides indirect support for the plausible positive impact of the application of AFT's core assumptions. Research suggests that persons often do better when they are drawn out of isolated self-preoccupation and into compassion, humble inquiry, responsibility, forgiveness, meaning, and supportive community. The literature also clarifies a crucial distinction: religious and moral frameworks appear most psychologically beneficial when they are lived through compassion, humility, forgiveness, social support, and meaning-making, and not through coercion, contempt, shame, fear, or exclusion.

Negative religious coping, including feeling punished, abandoned, or rejected by God, has been associated with poorer psychological adjustment (Aggarwal et al., 2023; Ano and Vasconcelles, 2005; Pankowski and Wytrychiewicz-Pankowska, 2023). Therefore, we have further evidence to support the invaluable nature of speaking the truth in love for human flourishing. Thus, AFT is best presented here not as an empirically settled treatment protocol, but as a theologically and philosophically grounded clinical framework whose component processes are supported by adjacent empirical literatures. Its value for the present argument is that it articulates a way forward for clinical practice in practical terms.

AFT begins with the conviction that the self is not healed by becoming the final object of therapeutic attention. This does not mean that the patient's suffering is dismissed, that symptoms are irrelevant, or that personal safety and boundaries do not matter. It means that the person is understood as an agentive and relational being, one whose healing is inseparable from how he or she sees, loves, harms, repairs, serves, forgives, and tells the truth to others. In this respect, AFT gives clinical form to the Christian claim that persons are not saved into isolation, but are invited into reconciled life with Christ and their neighbor.

If the failure of the therapeutic is that modern psychology too often reduces healing to symptom relief, self-validation, or nonjudgmental affirmation detached from truth, then AFT provides a concrete alternative: therapy ordered toward the good of the other, disciplined by curiosity, sustained in community, and animated by compassion that refuses to abandon truth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we must emphasize one last point: bringing Christlike-love and truth-telling into the therapy room cannot be accomplished by simply "sprinkling some gospel terminology" on top of whatever secular theory or set of techniques a therapist has decided to adopt. Rather, the Christ-centered approach we are describing here requires a complete overhaul, not simply a slight adjustment, of why and how one does what one does as a therapist, as well as often exactly what one does as a therapist. Doherty (1995, pp. 72-73) makes a relevant point in this direction when he writes:

> [Insight oriented, humanistic, and growth-oriented therapies] stress honest expression of wants and feelings, but more for the sake of authenticity and self-development than as a moral mandate. The emphasis is on my need and right to express what is true for me, rather than on your need and right to hear the truth from me. The distinction is not a trivial one. . . . My point is not that a psychodynamically [or humanistically] oriented therapist would never address the moral dimension of lying, but that the therapeutic discourse generated by the model itself cannot generate moral discussion.

In short, it is essential for patients' healing that the discourse fostered by therapists and the models to which they ascribe invite fully moral, truly

loving, and truthful conversations regarding what Christ termed, "the weightier matters of the law" (Matthew 23:23).

By embracing the intimately intertwined nature of truth and love, the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers a surer, more complete foundation for emotional, psychological, spiritual, and moral healing and reconciliation (i.e., atonement), bridging relational divides and fostering compassion, forgiveness, humility, and that deep sense of mutual love and respect that brings peace to the troubled soul. Let us strive to bring genuine compassion and truth-telling to the forefront of our practice, taking upon ourselves not only a commitment to "suffer-with" our patients in their suffering (see Gantt, 2000, 2005) but also to invite them to engage the very real possibilities of transformative change that are entailed in the prophetic promise that "the merciful obtain mercy" (Uchtdorf, 2012).

In doing so, we can contribute to the redemption of sorrowing souls and restoration of our fractured society by offering a path toward the profound and lasting healing that knits together souls, minds, and hearts promised by and only truly found in the Savior Himself. Psychotherapy has many aims and performs many functions, not the least of which—at least, for committed Latter-day Saint practitioners—must be the intentional, gentle, loving encouragement of our patients to become better people by treating their fellow human beings in the way that God has both commanded and in which all deserve.

A Latter-day Saint Christian therapist's most basic aim, both professionally and in covenant, ought to be to assist their patients in being properly equipped to go out into the world as better people, ones who can truly desire and intentionally help alleviate the suffering and burdens of others, and, hopefully, in so doing, help renew and re-invigorate a world immersed in discord, confusion, and pain.

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

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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

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 valuebias 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 worldview 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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