

The Proper Equipment

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I am tempted to use this unique occasion to address my remarks, not to 15,000 people, but to one. I understand that your brilliant and handsome president, one of my dearest friends, has yet to become converted to the joys of jogging or the gospel according to Moody, Fisher, and Zimmerman. Even worse, of late his public pronouncements have been riddled with aerobic agnosticism. However, I have concluded that the problem of the Holland mitochondria being left under a bushel must be left for another occasion and perhaps another speaker.

At this great university you have been involved in learning. Learning is a process that has significance for not only your financial success but also your happiness for the next forty or fifty years. The extent to which your BYU experience will enrich your pocketbooks and your lives will depend to a considerable degree on how well you have mastered the process at this institution. It will depend even more on whether you have succeeded in making learning a part of your regimen for living.

Learning is also an eternal value. Indeed I know of nothing more central to eternal progress. Thus, we know that whatever degree of intelligence we attain in this life, "it will rise with us in the resurrection" (D&C 130:18). Note

that the word is *intelligence*, which I submit is broader than either *information* or *knowledge*. In the eternal scheme of things it may or may not be important for you to know the rule in *Shelley's Case* or the second law of thermodynamics. But what is important is that you be able to use the tools by which you come to an understanding of the rule in *Shelley's Case*, the second law of thermodynamics, or any other piece of substantive information. Given an eternity in which to accomplish the task, I would assume that knowledge can be obtained by those who develop the proper equipment.

Two Categories

What, then, is the proper equipment? What are the tools we use to comply with the biblical injunction to gain understanding, the processes whose toughening and honing and enlarging constitute part of our eternal objective and will also make us happier persons in this life?

In my view, those processes can be divided into two categories. I will refer to them as the

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rational process and the extrarational process. The rational process is the one that you have used in your endeavors at this university. Its components should be familiar to all of you: reading, analysis, succinct written and oral expression, research, criticism, and skepticism.

In several senses, the extrarational process is different. Its methods are not the same. The results, when properly employed and properly interpreted, are much more sure. The process is not available to everyone. Neither is it as susceptible to individual human control. It is also, however, a superior process.

For centuries prior to 1820, human beings had debated about the nature of God. On occasion, hundreds of the world's best scholars had assembled for the purpose of resolving the issue by application of their combined intellectual talents. Out of centuries of rational effort, then, evolved the prevailing Christian concept of Deity. And yet in the space of just a few minutes, a boy of fourteen years learned more about the true nature of God than had come from centuries of the best rational effort of the world's finest minds. It did not result from debate, analysis, criticism, or human intellectual exchange. The process was extrarational. It came through revelation.

I would like to explore with you some of the relationships between these two great learning processes and the significance of those relationships to our happiness and progress in this life and the next. There are many such relationships. I will discuss three.

Not Mutual Antagonists

The first is that these two processes, properly understood, are not mutual antagonists. On the contrary, I believe that both the scriptures and human experience identify them as complementary and mutually supportive.

It should come, however, as no surprise to anyone that some people develop more proficiency with one of these processes than with

the other. It is a predictable, but nonetheless unfortunate, consequence that those who feel more comfortable with one of them are frequently inclined to downplay or even be suspicious of the other. Worst of all, they may tend to ridicule or even stop using the method with which they feel less comfortable or are less proficient. Thus, we find some people completely rejecting understanding that is not rational in origin or rationally verifiable. Equally regrettable, on the other end of the spectrum, is the view that higher education and the tools that it employs are to be distrusted and avoided.

I submit that either of these attitudes is not only wrong but reflective of a fundamental misunderstanding of the scriptures and of the foundational eternal objective to pursue the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. Section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants is explicit on this point. It does not enjoin us to seek learning "either by study or by faith." Neither does it admonish that "If ye have achieved learning by faith, ye are thereby permanently exempted from study." Rather, the commandment is to obtain learning and to obtain it both "by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118). The plain message is that the two are companions, not antagonists—that no person is truly learned whose learning experiences exclude either the rational or the extrarational method.

Again, the experience of the Prophet is instructive. His was an experience that we would regard as classic extrarational learning, yet it was preceded by extensive rational effort. And the famous instruction given to Oliver Cowdery in section 9 of the Doctrine and Covenants also involves a combination of the two processes:

You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. [D&C 9:8]

To be sure, there are differences in the two processes. For one, the driving force is the spirit, and for the other, the mind. One is more reliable if it leads to divine sources; the other is more deliberate and more subject to human control.

But both are means to the same end. The true intellectual is one whose intellect is sufficiently developed that he recognizes not only the great potential, but also the limitations, of his intellectual capacity. Similarly, there is no need for the person who has acquired understanding through spiritual insights to be suspicious of those who acquire learning by study. The most learned people I know, and you have a number of role models seated on the stand before you, are people who find no inconsistency between study and faith and who have achieved proficiency in each. We should feel equally at home in the academy and in the temple. We should regard each as a center of learning. We know that the day will come when the lamb will lie down with the lion. We need not await the millennium for the scholar to be a patriarch, and the patriarch a scholar.

Understanding a Differing Viewpoint

I turn now to the second relationship. It is an inevitable consequence of free agency—that different people applying the rational process to the same issue will reach different conclusions. When this occurs, do not assume that your opponent has either failed to think the problem through or is being dishonest. Indeed, one of the surest marks of the intellectually mature person is a willingness to try to understand a point of view with which he or she disagrees.

John Stuart Mill said that he who knows only his own case knows little of that. From the narrow perspective of my own profession, Mill's advice is a cornerstone of good lawyering. The best lawyers are those who spend almost as much effort developing an

understanding of the strengths of their opponents' cases as they do their own.

But the principle of which Mill spoke is a broader one, reaching far beyond the lawyering context. The truly learned person—of any profession—is one who is willing to try to understand to the best of his ability the opposing viewpoint, not just in the sense of being able to state what it is, but genuinely attempting to comprehend its merit. That kind of attitude about a position with which you disagree is, I believe, nothing more than a manifestation of the admonition stated in so many of the Savior's teachings that we should be concerned about others and not just ourselves. The true Samaritan, the person who is genuinely concerned about his neighbor, is sensitive not just for his neighbor's physical needs—food, clothing, and shelter—but for his thoughts as well.

For the lawyer, understanding a position with which you disagree will enhance your professional proficiency. For the citizen and the eternal being, it will advance you along the road to happiness and eternal perfection.

What If Results Differ?

The third and final relationship that I will discuss between these two great learning processes is perhaps the most important: What should you do when these two processes yield different results? It doesn't happen very often. For most of you it may never occur. But for some of you, during the course of your lives, there may occur instances in which your mental processes lead to a conclusion that you know is wrong because it is at odds with revealed truth. On those rare occasions when this happens, if it does, what should you do?

First, let me tell you what you do not do. You do not reject the value of intellectual effort—as the process that brought you to a conclusion that by definition has to be wrong.

It would be an erroneous and unfortunate oversimplification to say that intellectual effort—including such necessary components

as skepticism and objectivity—is to be avoided because it can and sometimes does lead to conclusions that are at odds with eternal values. The reason that this would be both unfortunate and erroneous is that intellectual effort—including that which occasionally leads to error—is itself an eternal value. In the dispute that preceded the war in heaven, one thing that everyone appeared to recognize was that under the Lord’s plan, some mistakes would be made. Indeed, the discretion to make choices, some of which by definition would be wrong, and then over the long run, in the event that we chose to do so, to work out those mistakes using our own resources, is *the* distinctive characteristic of the plan we chose.

How well I remember the words of a powerful lecture—given about forty years ago—by one of the elder members of my family to a then young man who had lost his testimony while attending college: “If I had a boy like you,” he thundered, “I’d send him through the world in illiteracy rather than see him lose his eternal soul.”

My brothers and sisters, if that were the choice, I would clearly make it the same way. But as I understand the gospel, that is not the choice. The choice is not between literacy and the eternal soul. The latter cannot exist without the former. It would be the gravest error, therefore, in the name of things eternal to say that careful, objective, critical, even skeptical intellectual effort is to be avoided because on occasion it can lead to disastrous results. That kind of rational effort is itself divinely ordained as the cornerstone of the plan we all chose when we kept our first estate.

I come, then, to what I believe is the correct answer to the question: What should we do when our rational processes lead to a conclusion inconsistent with revealed truth?

As in the case with many important principles, the answer to that question can be fairly simply stated. It is the following: Since the rational process is subject to human error,

and revealed truth is not, over the interim period (which could extend beyond the term of this life), until we can confirm through our own intellectual faculties that which has come through a more sure source, we simply recognize that it is a more sure source and that our inability to reach a reconciliation is only another indication of the imperfection of the human intellect.

I want to caution that the principle is necessarily premised on the existence of a genuine conflict between the products of, on the one hand, rational processes that amount to revealed truth. My experience as a stake president on this campus taught me to be cautious in that respect. It is not uncommon for individuals to obtain what they perceive to be divine confirmation, when in fact, the process, while truly extrarational, involves only an emotional support for an answer that was based on nothing but emotion in the first place.

There is, of course, no problem in that respect where revealed truth, scriptural truth, is involved. In those instances, the challenge of this life does not include the need to rationalize whether the principles revealed by those processes are or are not true. Do your best, but, if you don’t succeed, it’s very clear which must prevail.

Let’s start with an easy example. I don’t smoke tobacco, and I don’t drink alcohol. The question whether I would smoke or drink, even in moderation, or on isolated occasions, for the achievement of social or business objectives, or even when no one was watching, is simply not an open question. The answer to that question was definitively provided for me by God himself in a revelation given to Joseph Smith on 27 February 1833. Even if I should conclude, through the utilization of my reasoning powers, that I would be a happier person if I smoked, and that the delightful smell on my clothes, and the aura of distinction and dignity that surrounds smokers is more important than ten or fifteen years added on to my life, I still

would not smoke. Similarly, I don't need to concern myself with whether eight years is the best age for baptism or whether there really ought to be seventeen apostles.

These, of course, are easy examples. And indeed, I will tell you that, for the person who has a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ, virtually all of the examples that you can hypothesize will be easy. For people who are convinced of the reality of the Restoration, conflicts between revealed truth and reasoned conclusions are so rare as to be virtually nonexistent. Most of you will probably go through an entire lifetime of thought and study without ever being bothered by such a conflict; if that is your happy lot, rejoice. You should conclude only that your rational processes are functioning properly because they are coming up with the right answers. But I am also telling you that it is no adverse reflection on you, on your mind, or on your soul or your values if on some occasion you are unable rationally to explain a principle of revealed truth. The seeming inconsistency is attributable only to the fallible nature of our rational capacity. It tells us nothing more than that there are some facts, some truths, some realities which our mortal minds are simply unable to comprehend.

Fortunately, the fact that some truths are beyond mortal comprehension is something that our minds can comprehend. This fact was impressed upon me early in life. As a young boy growing up on a sawmill, I would gaze out into the clear, starry night, puzzling over what was really out there. My Sunday School teacher told me that space is without end. My brain was unable then, and is unable still, to comprehend that the alternative is totally unacceptable. If there is some point out there where it all comes to an end, then the question is, What's on the other side? These questions concerning space and their equally perplexing counterpart relating to time (I can handle time having no end; I cannot handle time having no beginning), supply the most cogent examples of which I am aware demonstrating the limitations of the rational process.

Happily for us, our minds are good enough to recognize their own shortcomings. That ought to alert us that, in those rare instances where, if it ever occurs, our minds lead us to a conclusion inconsistent with truth that comes from a source not subject to those same shortcomings, there is no doubt which should prevail. That this may be our happy lot is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.