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MAKING SENSE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

*"Wow, what an interesting, thought-provoking article!"
"But if it's correct, then what meaning does my life have?"*

These two reactions inevitably spilled from our lips as we edited the second part of John-Charles Duffy's Book of Mormon historicity article, "Perspectives from the Sociology of Knowledge."

Are our deepest beliefs really rooted in which circle of friends we like to hang out with best? Does rationality really play so small a role in our search for truth?

Not wanting to plunge our readers into an existential abyss without at least a penlight, SUNSTONE has asked four smart people to offer insights they have gained from their interactions with the social constructionist viewpoint.

The Orthodoxy of Uncertainty

by Stephen C. Taysom

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THINKERS FROM GALILEO TO FREUD AND FROM Jesus to Joseph Smith have discovered time and again that people do not usually take kindly to the notion that reality is much more complex, subtle, and apparently irrational than we are likely to believe. Similarly, John-Charles Duffy's thoughtful essay overlaying Book of Mormon historicity debates with social constructionist theory might lead some readers to feel a bit disoriented, put off, or even angry. I happen to see a great deal of value in the ideas Duffy presents, so it would be unfortunate indeed if some thoughtful readers tuned him out because of the intellectual discomfort that often accompanies the exploration of new ideas.

In my own teaching, I have found that using a few simple analogies to introduce these theories to undergraduates are helpful. My favorite is the football analogy. The basic idea behind social constructionist theory is that persons decide how to weigh, evaluate, countenance, or dismiss "evidence" for

some proposition, idea, or event, because of deep, sometimes subconscious, community allegiances. So when a flag is thrown during a football game, the coach of the team that is penalized almost always displays an opposite reaction to the coach of the team that is not. Both coaches see the same event, both watch the replays on the jumbotron at the same time. But everyone, from the coach to the fan in the nosebleed seats, reacts to the flag, not based on the intrinsic evidence but on community allegiance.

To be sure, the debates that Duffy examines are a good deal more sophisticated than the simple football analogy. Nevertheless, it is hard to argue with the basic premise that something other than "rationality" is at work here. And this is what many readers will find troubling. What we are dealing with here is not the possibility that some newfound bit of evidence could be discovered which would establish something like a general consensus among believers and non-believers about the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. The fear that one's worldview may be upended by new evidence is bad enough, but discovering that one's own perceptions of "evidence" are based on something other than rationality is profoundly upsetting.

Duffy's article is powerful because it places a metaphorical "bridge out" sign over the epistemological river of rationality. There must be an objective answer somewhere on the other side of that river, but no one is ever going to get there. Or, more precisely, they have no way of proving that they are there, even to themselves. It is the gut-wrenching realization of such epistemological uncertainty that leads some simply to amplify their own arguments in the belief that, if such arguments are loud and cocky enough, if they carry a sufficient dose of swagger, they may eventually convince even the speaker him- or herself.

Duffy ought to be commended for spelling out in theoretical terms what many sense instinctively, if impressionistically, already—that when it comes to evidence, particularly in the case of the Book of Mormon historicity debates, most parties are looking for confirmation.

WHAT IS MOST fascinating to me is that Duffy has traditional LDS epistemological and revelatory opinion firmly on his side. Two famous instances

drawn from LDS scriptural texts illustrate this point. The first is from a revelation that is now Section 5 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Received in early 1829, this revelation is in part a response to Joseph Smith's desire to "convince" others of the reality of his visionary experiences by showing them physical artifacts, particularly the plates from which the Book of Mormon were translated. The revelation stipulates, however, that the only evidence to be presented is God's "word" carried by missionaries commissioned by Joseph Smith. If people fail to believe the words brought by those messengers, the document declares, then "they would not believe...if it were possible that you should show them all these things which I have committed unto you." According to the God of Joseph Smith, prior allegiance to an idea or a community dictates the power of any apparently empirical evidence.

This is precisely the point made in the second textual example, this time from the thirty-second chapter of Alma in the Book of Mormon. Alma holds that the very first step in obtaining spiritual knowledge is the desire to believe. Such desire, it seems fair to argue, must necessarily stem from an a priori emotional connection to some kind of communally enacted belief or value system. Even in what is perhaps Mormonism's most famous case of epistemological instruction, known as "Moroni's promise," it is the esteem in which the sociological actor holds this community, rather than the sheer force of its empirical reality, that leads first to feelings of desire for confirmation, which is followed by experimentation, and which concludes with spiritual confirmation.

If nothing else, a conscious engagement with social constructionist theory ought to lead to a sharper definition among apologists and readers of apologetics about the aims of the historicity debates themselves. However, the debates that Duffy cites are not the only apologetics that need reimagining if the theories he presents hold true. It seems to me that those "Liahona" Mormons who spend time attempting to defend Mormonism's virtues to their intellectual audiences by down-playing the supernatural claims and foregrounding the cultural elements of the faith could also learn something about their arguments.

And what if, by some strange twist of fate, it turns out that those writing for FARMS and FAIR and those writing for *Dialogue* and SUNSTONE are doing their respective work out of allegiance to the same community? I daresay that this is very possible and would prove a simultaneously deeply disconcerting and profoundly joyful discovery.

My Book Club with God

by Janet Garrard-Willis

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READING PART TWO OF JOHN-CHARLES DUFFY'S "Mapping Book of Mormon Historicity" plunked me right back down in the middle of my sophomore year at BYU, the year all centers failed and I had to lose my faith in order to find it.

The first lecture I heard on social constructionism spurred me to chase down the professor and barrage him with frantic questions: "What about the author's intent? What about what the book really means? How can I ever write anything that will do any good in the world if my intentions and the genesis of my work are irrelevant? What about the Book of Mormon? The Bible? How do I know I understand them? Answers to prayers?"

Slight pause.

"I'm confused and angry."

The professor kindly listened to my babble and then informed me that I should be angry and should be confused. This, he intimated, was good for me.

It didn't feel good for me. Iron rods gone wobbly, Liahonas pointing every which way, the notion that my explication of God's will might have nary a thing to do with the actual wishes of my Creator. Certainly Duffy's article might similarly unmoor its readers. Still, like a small-town kid hitting the collegiate wall of theory, losing our footing can be quite good for us. Not comfortable, certainly, but good.

The messy reality of a Mormon ward probably doesn't divide neatly into the polar extremes of apologist/revisionist scales, though repeatedly superimposing that paradigm onto our wards can make it more so. Most wards contain people who deftly toggle between epistemologies at work and at church, suspending different sorts of disbelief in order to build different communities. Some never notice that they're doing this; others (like me) quite enjoy such fluidity.

I imagine that if we drew a Venn diagram mapping the belief systems of any ward, we wouldn't find a bunch of people in two different circles that didn't touch, but rather multiple circles with overlapping arcs: anthropologists who understand that the temple ceremony is not unique but who believe it is uniquely situated in a priesthood-bearing church; neurologists who can parse the way a human brain creates "paranormal" experience but who also believe such experiences serve as conduits between God and humans as well as between misfiring neurons; blue-collar workers who read widely from numerous fields or navigate their worlds via different sorts of intuition. Some might "choose a position" of formally announcing preference for one epistemology over others, but those folks will probably continue to employ other systems anyway.

In these schemata, each individual's circle may very likely intersect with those of other ward members at one point or another. When brought to our attention, those spaces of intersection will probably cause some spiritual dissonance—and that space is where we can choose to focus on positive or negative

communal growth. In the terminology of anthropologist Victor Turner, such overlap and tension places us in “liminal” space, where paradox looms large and where introspection, coupled with ritual, can lead to transformative change.

According to Turner, true community forms in such space. Imagine a ward where a number of members realize that what is useful (and even “true”) in one setting ceases to be useful (and possibly true) in another. Now imagine those same people actively working to map the overlap between truth-building endeavors. While the individuals would come to different conclusions regarding the degree to which their belief systems could be compartmentalized, peacefully coalesced, or even brought into constructive paradox, all would have to either consciously consider or consciously ignore the needs and faith of the others. Reaching identical conclusions is less important than the active process of looking at self and group and then deciding how to treat one another.

We can choose humility and utility. We can also choose pride, hierarchy, and stagnation. Do we choose to condemn someone with split epistemological loyalties, or recognize the utility in his or her honesty? Do we allow that honesty to further augment our own, to inspire the sort of reflection urged in the fifth chapter of Alma? Knowing that the word “true” holds different meanings in similarly sincere testimonies regarding the gospel, do we choose to count only the sincerity of those whose definitions match our own, or do we actively work to engage different meanings meaningfully in our ward families?

REMEMBER STANLEY FISH'S students, the ones who built meaning out of a random chalkboard list? We can take social constructionism and argue that the students rendered themselves fools, wasting all that time on a text which wasn't. But such a cynical reading misses a different possibility: that a text never took primacy in their activity in the first place. Rather, shared knowledge of things such as cultural commonplaces, investigative process, and metaphor facilitated the cohesion of certain social bonds. The social constructionist view of their endeavor places more responsibility on the students than would a view in which they simply unearthed a truth already sitting there, discovered by countless students before them. They became creators, and of a whole lot more than a slapdash bit of college analysis.

Should Mormons embrace the social constructionist view, they would likewise see themselves as active participants in the creation of a truth which concerns not just some point of genesis (angels and ancient civilization vs. antebellum America) and a faraway telos of eventual salvation, but entails working out our salvation in the here and now.

To borrow from both Joseph Smith and Eugene England, we'd engage in the active process of “proving contraries,” of hashing out idealistic beliefs in the practical business of helping to save each other—both in spite of and through our differences. Arguing with someone and then helping them through a family crisis might become just a touch easier if we accept *prima facie* the notion that nobody in the argument has unclouded vision.

Whether or not Joseph Smith received an ancient record at angelic behest will still matter, of course, just as it matters whether or not we can work within our differences and our overlapping spaces of angst to help each other load a U-haul or weather an ongoing crisis of faith.

A Church-wide embrace of social constructionism—and let's be clear, I don't think such a thing is going to happen—won't render the truth claims of our Church unimportant. What it could do, though, is lend us not just relativism, but a relative perspective into other's hearts. Having witnessed another's tussle in the transition space of liminality could free us from the belief that integrity allows only one approach to truth. If we accept that Truth (capital “T”) might be out there but that we only build approximations (lowercase “t”), we'd also have to consider that our architecture might not work for someone else. We also might consider that alternate architectures aid others in contributing to the community of faith, something they wouldn't be able to do if pressured toward ultimatums.

I'm quite glad my introduction to social constructionism didn't involve an ultimatum: I don't know what I'd have chosen. But had I rejected rather than waded through my overlapping belief systems, I'd have either lost my faith or found it in equally useless suspension. Instead, I wrestled with my own angels and alphabets.

IVIDILY RECALL WATCHING Wilfred Griggs write “Myth = A True Story” across the chalkboard in my history of civilization course and feeling my world shift once again. Suddenly the definition of “truth” begged not one but multiple definitions for multiple contexts. Such a notion excited me immensely; I wrote my first paper for Dr. Griggs about Pandora and Eve and avoided invoking historicity to elevate one tale over the other. To the extent that I could employ both stories in a quest to invent myself as a mother of creation, both functioned equally well. Instead of thinking I had to make the sometimes at-odds doctrines of different books coalesce and reveal platonic truths exactly as a prophet meant them, I started to look at my Book of Mormon as a sort of discussion piece in my Book Club with God—a book club which concerned building not so much a list of commandments as an individual.

However, getting to this point involved a great deal of sobbing on the kitchen floor through a package of Oreos as I wondered whether the fervent testimonies I'd borne in high school were mostly formed by social conditioning and wondering whether God could send me an angel to settle the questions. Both mattered—it's the continuing tension between such experiences that inspires me to approach Truth (though I know it isn't totally accessible) by building a truth with human hands and a human soul that tries to connect with God as well as with his other children. Taking the focus off the perfection of the text and putting it onto how I could use the text to improve myself and my community allows me to more fully love my brothers and sisters, helping them in our shared helplessness and strength.

My faith was neither saved nor entirely constructed during my sophomore year. Rather, I learned that the process matters. It has as much to do with happiness as with any final telos, and so I'm uninterested in completing myself and then hanging around in some glorious boredom for a few dull decades. No, I'm interested in trying out new ideas, both to comprehend ephemera and to better understand, and thus help, the people around me. Maybe I'll "live" myself into perfection the same way the poet Rainer Maria Rilke said "living questions" could result in finding oneself already amidst the answers: too much focus on the end precludes becoming the person worthy of winding up there.

In Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Miss Maudie announces her chagrin at the ability of some folks to spend so much time worrying about the next life that they never learn to live in this one. That rings "true" for me. Navigating this life demands different approaches to different questions.

That's not compromise; that's creativity. I choose to believe the Creator approves.

Richer Than Yea or Nay

By Dan Wotherspoon

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AS DUFFY NOTES IN PART I OF HIS ARTICLE, I'M ON record as having chosen a deliberate strategy of remaining open to the question of Book of Mormon historicity (SUNSTONE, October 2008, 53).

As I've tried through the years to deconstruct why I made and continue to make this choice, I've mostly emphasized the role the Book of Mormon has played in my own faith journey. The Book of Mormon has been the catalyst for many life-changing experiences whose reality and importance I cannot and do not want to diminish. So whenever I encounter something in the Book of Mormon that feels small or exaggerated or in some other way obviously human (whether the humanness of Joseph Smith as author/translator or the humanness of Mormon or Nephi), I deliberately try to recall passages that have opened the heavens for me. This act calls me back into connection with the things about the Book of Mormon that matter more to me than its human fingerprints. As a balancing strategy, this usually works pretty well for me—raging that slowly gives way to remembering.

I'm grateful, though, for Duffy's article bringing into sharper focus another reason why I keep Book of Mormon historicity a live question. I appreciate the article's roundabout reminder of the absolute importance of continually evaluating which communities I esteem most, whose plausibilities I most want to be in conversation with, whose fellowship I long for the most—because, if these sociological models are accurate, these are the

people I'm most likely going to grow to become like. When I look at my belief decisions through this lens, I see even more boldly why I don't want to choose one way or the other on historicity.

The reason is that neither of the two main positions on historicity impresses me as sufficiently nuanced for the person I really want to become. In meeting questions and living my life, I don't want to be someone who won't consider the large truths that lie beyond religious boundaries. I also don't want to be someone who rejects everything that lies outside what can be approached through human senses, language, and intellect. Similar to Moses who could see nothing special as he stood face to face with Satan—"I am a son of God, in the similitude of his Only Begotten; and where is thy glory that I should worship thee?" (Moses 1:13)—I'm left cold by both Book of Mormon historicity camps and the easy salvations they preach. Whether I'm truly a son of God or a being flared into existence by the processes of this universe, my most profound experiences tell me I'm worthy of richer options than a simple yea or nay. Choosing shouldn't end choice. It should multiply it.

Because of the profound experiences I've had within Mormonism and its rich vocabulary for talking about human potential and expansively embracing every truth wherever it is found, I remain a Mormon and active in the Church. I don't believe in Mormon exclusivisms any more than I believe in any exclusivisms. My fellow members and Church leaders don't always understand or accept me, but it is within the Mormon community that I still feel called to live, work, learn, and teach. This doesn't mean, however, that I don't also seek fellowship with other communities both inside and outside Mormonism that express plausibility structures that allow for more complex views of scripture and human journeying.

SLOWLY, OVER THE years, I have discovered that there really is a community whose ways of knowing and valuing offer me a peace that matches my sense that life is far more remarkable than what can be described by language or captured by human intellect. However, it's a community that is not easy to spot. It is found among many different people and places. So I'm always on the lookout, seeking out this community through reading and conversing with wise people and through deep contemplation, for its fellowship demands that we pay attention to and align our inner lives and outer actions.

My first explicit recognition that I had begun to discover the existence of this community for myself came eleven years ago as I connected deeply with James Fowler's descriptions of those people within every tradition who have pushed beyond simply accepting the orthodoxies of either religion or secularism. They are people who honor the contributions both offer but live in wonder more than certainty. Most often these people remain embedded within the traditions that nurtured them, but at the same time they transcend the particularities of their Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Mormonism, or Scientism and live lives that are grounded in what is the deepest, richest, and truly universal. I had recog-

nized and been drawn to these kinds of people before, but I hadn't been able to articulate exactly what it was about them that was different, what secrets they possessed that allowed them to move forward optimistically even in the midst of so much shallowness.

Now that I have been alerted to this community, however, I find descriptions of them everywhere. They are people who, as Rachel Naomi Remen writes, recognize that "life is a process whose every event is connected to the moment that just went by," that we are all on a sacred journey and that "an unanswered question is a fine traveling companion. It sharpens [our] eye for the road." They are those whom E.M. Forster calls "the sensitive, the considerate, the plucky" whose "members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages" and whose "temple, as one of them remarked, is the holiness of the Heart's affections, and their kingdom, though they never possess it, is the wide-open world." Krista Tippetts describes them as people who are able to honor "both poetry and physics, scripture and science, alleluiah and analysis." As I continue my journey with the Book of Mormon, these are the companions I seek.

Entanglement

By E. George Goold

E. GEORGE GOOLD has worked as a journalist in many different areas of the United States. Currently he is single, apprenticed to an artisan beer brewer, writing the great Mormon novel, and trying to get up the guts to go to church.



Is Rockwell a paradox? There is a simple explanation: He was a Mormon—and any attempt to analyze the man must be predicated upon that statement . . . He was a Mormon. He was a good Mormon. —HUGH NIBLEY

LIKE ME, ORRIN PORTER ROCKWELL HAD LONG hair for a man. Long flowing locks. Rockwell's resplendent mane was a matter of prophetic decree, as a matter of fact. Joseph Smith once blessed him, "Orrin Porter Rockwell, cut not thine hair and no bullet nor blade shall hurt thee, no harm shall come upon thee nor enemies have power over thee."

Rockwell was basically the Secret Service for Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. A bodyguard. A tough. A killer nicknamed the Destroying Angel. A man who did the necessary dirty work during dark and bloody times. As one anonymous journal entry recorded, "When the fear of God has left a man's heart, that is when you send men like Porter Rockwell to drive the fear back in again."

We can safely assume, I think, that Rockwell would have no opinion regarding the historicity of the Book of Mormon. He was semi-literate. He could barely read the book at all. Perhaps he felt, as I do, that one doesn't really have to read it to know it's true.

Like me, Porter Rockwell moved West and opened a brewery. His was in Utah near Point of the Mountain, on land that now boasts a state prison. Mine is in the North Fork Valley on the western slope of the Colorado Rockies. Rockwell provided high-grade whiskey and stout brews at his saloon while I am an apprentice craft brewer. His drinking didn't impact his steady and devoted Church service, nor was he considered a sinner. My drinking does impact my Church service, and people will say I'm a sinner.

"Your beliefs about historicity are a function of your relationships with other people, in and out of the Church," says John-Charles Duffy. Porter Rockwell is an important member of my network, as is Terrence McKenna.

McKenna was born in Paonia, Colorado, where I live. A writer, philosopher, ethnobotanist, and student of shamanism, I doubt he had an opinion regarding the historicity of the Book of Mormon. But he is a member of my network because of his theories about time. "McKenna theorized that the linear structure of time could be a temporary illusion," writes Daniel Pinchbeck in his noteworthy study of contemporary shamanism, *Breaking Open the Head*, "and that time might actually be a wave form, fractal, or spiral... He speculated that in the last years leading up to the crest and collapse of this wave, we might see a speeded-up replay of all of human history as a cartoon farce."

A replay of all of human history, then, might find the Tower of Babel on the same wavelength as the 9/11 bombings of the Twin Towers. The United States' global military campaign might fit on the same frequency with the expansion of the Roman Empire and the Crusades. And the path of Porter Rockwell, who defended the prophets, drank heavily, and swore like a sailor while serving his fellow Saints, might resonate with my own frequency as I brew beer in the mountains and dream about a time when Mormons like me are still needed. Or even wanted.

My network is full of heroes who bolster my belief in the historicity of the Book of Mormon, whether they're members of the Church or not. Whether they're alive or not. I don't even care if they're fictional characters.

Bill Henrickson, the polygamist hero on HBO's *Big Love*, certainly has an interesting take on the subject. We see Bill baptize his children. We see him confer the priesthood upon his oldest son. We see him fast and pray in times of need. We see him build upon a testimony forged in a life spent not only believing in the historicity of Mormon scripture, but living it. So much so that he actually believes that small part in Doctrine and Covenants 132 about having multiple wives. I admire the fictional Bill, because at least he walks his talk. His belief drives his action, and personal revelation determines his choices. We should all be so lucky.

If I adopt McKenna's approach to time, I can reach into the past and pull people like Rockwell into my network. Perhaps I can even reach into my television and give Henrickson a tap. Then, as Duffy says, it is my interaction with them and the entanglement of my own identity with theirs—the sins and the passions we share—that builds the foundation of my belief.