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We Live in the Olden Days: Reflections on the Importance of Scientific and Theological Humility

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Steven L. Clark

Abstract: *Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have a unique perspective on truth. Our knowledge that Salvation likely involves participation in complex eternal activities requiring significantly more understanding than we currently possess naturally leads us to seek truth and, in addition, to seek an understanding of that truth. Under these circumstances, our inability to fully understand many truths, both revealed and discovered, can lead to confusion. A lack of complete understanding of accepted scientific truth generally leads the serious truth-seeker to enhanced investigative and educational efforts without doubting the ultimate veracity of the concept under investigation; we all believe in gravity, but no one completely understands it. In a similar manner, the fact that an individual is bothered by such an incompletely understood truth is rarely seen as reason to reject it; gravity bothers me a lot — were it not for gravity, I could fly. Unfortunately, an inability to fully understand some revealed truths all too often leads to rejection of that truth rather than an acceptance of one's conceptual limitations and an enhanced effort at understanding the concept in question. Such an approach can be as disastrous (although often not as immediately disastrous) as disregard of the reality of gravity. Consideration of examples of both scientific and spiritual experience may lead to a more rational reaction to truths that we do not, and sometimes at our present level of understanding, simply cannot, completely comprehend.*

My professional responsibilities include conducting seminars with young physicians undergoing specialty and subspecialty training. Among other things, we commonly discuss twins. I often conclude these discussions by recounting a dilemma faced by medical scientists in the early twentieth century, namely, why is it that like-gendered

twins (boy/boy or girl/girl) may be born in one amniotic sac or separate amniotic sacs, but twins of different genders are always in separate sacs? For scientists today, the answer is straightforward and follows from basic principles of embryology and genetics. However, these principles were completely foreign to investigators of that time. A quote from the first edition of what was, in 1903, and remains today the most widely respected textbook in obstetrics recounts the author's consideration of various explanations of these puzzling observations. He then concludes that this phenomenon appears to demonstrate the intervention of "Providence," which "took this means of guarding their morals *in-utero*" by ensuring that the female fetus would never be in the same sac as her twin brother.[1]

At this point I pause, waiting for the inevitable smiles and polite snickers that follow. Having given these young doctors just enough time to dig themselves a hole, I then gently push them in with the reminder that the author of this text was at least as smart as any of us, and more widely published than most serious scientists ever hope to be. I suggest that 100 years from now, perhaps in this very room, a group of young physicians may be discussing some aspect of modern medicine that we today consider to represent absolute, unequivocally demonstrated truth, which will, in their eyes, seem as hopelessly simplistic, incorrect and downright silly as this early twentieth-century "truth" regarding twin pregnancy appears to us today. I remind them of the importance of humility in science and propose that in terms of ultimate truth, the lessons of history tell us that while our knowledge of the natural world may be highly advanced relative to those who came before, in terms of absolute truth, it is still likely to be primitive. I then conclude with an admonition to remember that in terms of our ultimate understanding of human physiology and disease, we still live in the olden days. As outlined below, the implications of this reality for both broader scientific and spiritual learning are significant.

Scientific Hubris

Most scientists have historically tended to assume that their generation is near the pinnacle of investigative discovery. Few ever publish their findings with the admonition that these conclusions ought to be taken with a grain of salt, since our understanding of truth is likely to be rudimentary when viewed from the likely perspective of future

1. J. Whitridge Williams, *Obstetrics,* facsimile ed. (Stamford, CT: Appleton and Lange, 1997), 329. First edition published in 1903 by D. Appleton (New York).

generations of investigators. This attitude was perfectly demonstrated by the now-famous observation of the Nobel prize winning physicist Albert Michelson in 1894: "The more important fundamental laws and facts of physical science have all been discovered, and these are now so firmly established that the possibility of their ever being supplanted in consequence of new discoveries is exceedingly remote. … [O]ur future discoveries must be looked for in the sixth place of decimals."[2] This just a few years before Relativity and Quantum Mechanics revolutionized the world of physics by demonstrating that almost everything we thought to be true was, at best, a rough approximation. Such errors continue to the present day. Michelson's misguided prediction regarding physics is echoed with remarkable similarity in the field of natural science in the words of the current-day atheist/author Richard Dawkins who observed that our existence "once presented the greatest of mysteries but … it is a mystery no longer because it is solved. Darwin and Wallace solved it, though we shall continue to add footnotes to their solution for a while."[3] An even broader assumption of the transcendent nature of current scientific thinking is found in the prediction of Peter Atkins in 1981 that "fundamental science may almost be at an end and might be completed within a generation."[4] While one might consider such statements

2. Albert A. Michelson, "1894 dedication of Ryerson Physical Laboratory," (Annual Register 1896), 159. Also cited at Albert Abraham Michelson, Quotable Quote, Goodreads.com, https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/953757-the-more-important-fundamental-laws-and-facts-of-physical-science.

3. Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), *xi*. Also partially cited at https://www.azquotes.com/quote/538440. One wonders whether the religious intensity with which some authors attack any notion of the incompleteness of Darwinian evolutionary theory is unique to biology or represents a broader scientific miasma. I am always amused when, after detailing a sequence of possible evolutionary steps involved in some difficult to understand aspect of life on earth and reaching a scientific and logical dead-end still short of the mark, the expositor invokes the concept of "after hundreds of millions of years, it could all work out." The concept of "hundreds of millions of years" being of course incomprehensible to mortals with a life expectancy measured in decades. That such magical hand-waving should be considered more rational than simply invoking God in the process seems strange. Is this not an example of the intolerance of one religion for another? Had the theories of relativity or quantum mechanics carried with them any implication of the potential existence of God, would the physics community still be desperately trying to force-fit all scientific observations on macro and micro scales into Newtonian physics?

4. Peter Atkins, *The Creation*, as quoted in John Horgan, "The Delusion of Scientific Omniscience," *Cross-Check* (blog), *Scientific American*,

as remarkable examples of presumptive arrogance, such erroneous approaches to truth are not unique to the twentieth century. Consider the following two examples.

Imagine you are a highly intelligent proto-scientist living 1000 years ago. You only believe what can be proven by direct, repeatable observation and wear your skepticism as a badge of honor and a hallmark of your intellectual prowess. One day you are confronted with a strange new theory proposing that the Earth revolves around the sun, and that you are hurtling through space on this moving earth at 67,000 miles per hour. You decide to test the theory through direct scientific observation, set a chair in a field facing east early one morning, and begin to record data. You clearly observe the sun rising, moving across the sky, and disappearing in the west. And the next morning here it comes again. You repeat this observation over the course of several days, taking careful notes, and invite several of your scientific-minded colleagues to repeat these experimental observations. Such scientific study would inevitably conclude that this new theory is in error and could be believed only by a fool; you and your colleagues have observed the sun rotating around the earth in real-time through confirmed, repeatable observation. And in terms of 67,000 miles per hour, what nonsense! You have walked, you have run, and being a cosmopolitan individual, you have even ridden a fast horse — you know what it is like to move at 40 miles per hour, and your senses tell you that as you sat in that chair, you were not moving at all. These conclusions would, at that time, be data driven and scientifically indisputable. The intelligence of the observer is not in doubt. Neither random nor systematic error come into play. The experimental observations are accurate and reproducible. And completely incorrect.

To what can we attribute these gross errors? The answer is simple. There are perspectives and dimensions inaccessible to our early scientist that would render reaching the correct conclusions based on scientific observation categorically impossible. He does not have Galileo's telescope, nor can he travel to the international space station — seen from these latter perspectives, the correct conclusions are easy to reach. Without such perspectives, error is inevitable.

Now fast forward several hundred years and consider the case of Isaac Newton, arguably the greatest scientist who ever lived. He introduced laws of motion and an accompanying system of mathematics that formed the basis of much of the technical progress that created

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September 4, 2019, https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/the-delusion-of-scientific-omniscience/.

our modern world. These laws are easily confirmed by repeatable experimental observations available and familiar to most students of high school physics. And they have been validated over the subsequent centuries by their use in the development of technology that works as expected in creating solutions to real-world mechanical challenges. And yet within a few years of Michelson's now-infamous boast, our ability to see things from previously unimagined perspectives was changed forever by the works of Einstein, Heisenberg, Schroedinger, and others. We now realize that the fundamental "truths" articulated by Newton are merely useful approximations applicable only to that small fraction of matter in the universe larger than an atom and smaller than an asteroid, and traveling very, very slowly with respect to the speed of light. In terms of most of our earthly human experiences, Newton's laws represent elegant and provable truth; for most of the matter and energy in the wider universe, Newton's laws are not even very good approximations. Until very recently it appeared that the basic components of the cosmos had been well figured out: electrons, protons, neutrons, photons, gravity. Then came the discovery that galaxies were moving in strange ways that cannot be accounted for based on the gravity of the visible matter within them, leading physicists to propose the existence of some form of matter (dark matter) that is more prevalent than the ordinary matter we see.[5] In a similar manner, observations of the motion of distant objects in the cosmos yielded data suggesting an accelerating expansion of the universe, driven by a mysterious force now called dark energy.[6] When evaluated in terms of energy, the combined effect of dark matter and dark energy accounts for 96% of the cosmos, totally overwhelming the matter and energy we thought was all there was. In other words, we currently have no idea of the nature of the matter and energy making up 96% of the cosmos. To say that we are currently just scratching the surface of an understanding of the nature of our universe is an understatement. Given these observations, in addition to mathematical models suggesting the inevitable existence of additional dimensions that, by definition, can never be experienced or experimentally proven, it seems unwise to assume that we have reached a scientific apogee in which things that cannot be proven or well understood cannot possibly be real. Such

5. Lisa Randall, "What is Dark Matter?," *Nature* 557 (May 10, 2018): 56–57, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-05096-y.

6. Davide Castelvecchi, "New Dark Energy Could Solve Universe Expansion Mystery," *Nature* 597 (September 23, 2021): 460–61, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02531-5.

considerations apply equally well to the biological sciences. Heredity and evolution once seemed a simple matter of chromosomes, genes, and natural selection acting on a gene pool occasionally spiced up by a rare, beneficial structural mutation. Enter epigenetics and the documentation that environmental influences can alter gene expression and inheritance without structural DNA changes.[7] When seen in the future through the lenses of dimensions and perspectives unavailable to us today, events currently considered incomprehensible or even miraculous will be as clear as the genetics of twin gestation, and any explanation as tautologic.

Science vs. Religion: A False Dichotomy

The implications of these observations for men and women of faith are immense; neither Christ's miraculous healings, Joseph's translation of the plates, nor Moroni's appearance in Joseph's bedroom are in any way explicable or reproducible using current scientific methodology. When considering these events, we would do well to heed the admonition of Jacob, who cautioned us that, with respect to the works of the Lord, "it is impossible that man should find out all his ways" (Jacob 4:8) and the words of Nephi that for many learned men, "their wisdom is foolishness" (2 Nephi 9:28). Certainly, this latter caution applies to people of the past and of the present. In this sense, the adjective *miraculous* is perhaps best understood as a word we use to describe an event that cannot *currently* be fully understood in terms of the standard process of scientific investigation, rather than an occurrence that is fundamentally unexplainable. Within my own lifetime, the use of FaceTime on a handheld iPhone to speak with and see a relative on another continent has been transformed from science fiction to fully explainable fact. I suspect many more surprises are in store. These observations are in line with the explanations of apparent miracles offered by Brigham Young and James Talmage detailed in a previous essay by Godfrey Ellis in this journal.[8]

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7. Jacob Penny, "Epigenetics, Darwin and Lamarck," *Genome Biology and Evolution* 7/6 (June 2015): 1758–60, https://academic.oup.com/gbe/article/7/6/1758/2467004. While superficial similarities exist between concepts of epigenetics and Lamarckian theory, differences are far more significant. This article should not be taken as an affirmation of Lamarckian theory, but simply as an example of a theory not quite as kooky as we once thought it to be.

8. Godfrey J. Ellis, "Experiential Knowledge and the Covenantal Relationship in Alma 7," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 51 (2022): 29–80, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/experiential-knowledge-and-the-covenantal-relationship-in-alma-7/; Brigham Young, in *Journal of*

In these considerations, a few words of caution are in order. First, these observations should not be seen as a criticism of science, or of the scientific method with which we investigate God's world. Nor do I mean to imply that all scientists or scientific writers share visions of present or impending scientific omniscience; a recent review by Peterson in this journal highlighted a series of historic scientific "bad calls" discussed in the popular lay journal *Scientific American*.[9] However, while most investigators today would avoid the type of explicit, conscious scientific hubris expressed by Michelson, subconscious assumptions in this regard may blind us to the potential limitations of current scientific dogma.[10] Rather, they should serve as a reminder of our limitations and that the science vs. religion dichotomy is a false one, generally articulated by those possessing only a rudimentary understanding of one or the other. Truth must be pursued either through rigorous adherence to the scientific method and application of sound, hypothesis-driven reasoning, through scriptural study and prayer, or, ideally, both. However, these equally valid approaches to the search for truth are best not mixed — to modify the pursuit of scientific investigation by simply claiming "God did it" is as inappropriate as trying to prove the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon with differential equations. Ultimately, both approaches to truth will converge at the same point. But not within our mortal lifetimes.

Second, both of these avenues to the pursuit of truth should be carried out with a fair dose of humility. Newton's laws represent very useful approximations to the physical laws that govern a limited portion of the universe; should we be surprised that Darwin's observations likewise clearly and accurately describe one piece of the process of

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Discourses, 13:140–41; James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1977), 220.

9. Jen Schwartz and Dan Schlenoff, "Reckoning with Our Mistakes: Some of the Cringiest Articles in the Magazine's History Reveal Bigger Questions about Scientific Authority," *Scientific American*, 323/3 (September 2020): 36–41, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/reckoning-with-our-mistakes/. This article is quoted in Daniel C. Peterson, "Reckoning with the Mortally Inevitable," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 39 (2020): *vii–xvi*, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/reckoning-with-the-mortally-inevitable/.

10. Horgan, "Delusion of Scientific Omniscience." It is perhaps worth noting that neither of these summaries of scientific error appeared in actual professional scientific journals. On the other hand, such omissions may simply represent the reasonable assumption that any serious scientist would recognize the original errors from a reading of subsequent peer-reviewed manuscripts, since years may have passed since the original publication and the original authors may now be deceased.

diversification of life? As has been observed previously, evolution is intelligent design. But in a similar manner, why would the honest seeker of truth be willing to repeat Michelson's error by assuming that minor refinements of Darwinian evolutionary theory are all there is, or can ever be to the complete story of life on earth?

Finally, it is important to realize that recognition of these limitations of our intellectual and scientific pursuit of truth does not, by itself, prove anything. Rather, rejection of the arrogant belief that anything we cannot understand through the lens of current scientific investigative techniques cannot possibly be true simply opens the door to serious pursuit of truth, both through renewed vigor in skeptical questioning of what we currently believe to be scientifically proven, and through the complementary spiritual process involving study, contemplation, and prayer.

Theological Hubris

When viewed in the proper light, scientific and spiritual approaches to truth are complementary and augment one another. Just how can an understanding of science help us better understand spiritual truths? First, by reminding us of the ultimate complexity of most important truths. On a hike in the mountains, a child is told to stay away from the edge of a cliff. She asks, "Why?" Consider the possible range of progressively complex answers to explain the effects of gravity. "Because you might get an owie." "Because you might fall down and hurt yourself." "Because all objects attract one another in proportion to their mass, and the earth is bigger than you are." "Because you exist in warped space-time." While all these answers are equally correct, our response to the child will vary according to her level of knowledge and sophistication. When considering concepts such as our pre-mortal existence, the Celestial Kingdom or Priesthood power, such considerations should help us realize that in terms of a complete understanding of these spiritual matters, most of us are probably at the "you will get an owie" stage. Thus, the scientific process contains potentially valuable lessons in epistemology in terms of our understanding of equally complex spiritual processes.

The response of Christ to questioning by the Sadducees regarding the ultimate marital fate of an unfortunate woman who was widowed six times is instructive in this regard (see Matthew 22:30). While often quoted, it is seldom observed that in his reply, Christ did not actually answer the question posed to him, a question which had nothing to do with the performance of marriages *after* this life. His response demonstrates two important principles with wider application to our

lives. First, the questioners in this instance were not humble truth seekers; rather, they were wicked men mocking the Savior and trying, through their questions, to discredit His teachings. The Lord's non-response teaches us that we, likewise, have no obligation to respond with a serious response to a non-earnest inquiry regarding Church doctrine. More importantly, we must ask ourselves just what a complete and truthful answer to this question would entail. "If she was married to one of these men in a temple of the Restoration through the New and Everlasting Covenant of Marriage by the power of the Melchizedek Priesthood, and if both partners lived worthy to inherit the Celestial Kingdom, she would be married to that man in the eternities. If not, she would not be married to any of them." To even a humble, earnest seeker of truth during Christ's life on Earth, this truthful answer would be meaningless. Temple of the restoration? New and Everlasting Covenant? Melchizedek Priesthood? Celestial Kingdom? Given the state of revealed knowledge at that time, an answer to the Sadducees' question would have been as impossible as explaining to Isaac Newton in a sentence or two quantum computing or the workings of an iPhone. The restoration of all things spiritual is an ongoing process, and to a large extent, we are still looking through a glass, darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12). There undoubtedly exist spiritual concepts, dimensions, and perspectives with which we are today unfamiliar and which render a completely satisfying answer to some of our purely spiritual questions equally impossible. At least today, both scientific and spiritual humility are important.

Science Complements Religion

Science may also help us better understand scriptural references. For example, much of the conflict between Galileo and the early Catholic Church stemmed from the church's misinterpretation of Old Testament scriptures indicating that "the world also shall be stable, that it be not moved" (1 Chronicles 16:30). An appreciation of the value of science would perhaps have moved the early church fathers to seek one of the numerous non-literal interpretations of this verse and thus increased their understanding of the true meaning of the scripture, in addition to eliminating conflict with Galileo. My own understanding of the process of evolution strengthens my appreciation for the genius underlying God's use of this process as one part of the intelligent design of life on earth.

Religion Complements Science

Faith in God likewise has the potential to augment scientific investigation. An acceptance of our profound human limitations ("For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" [Isaiah 55:9]) should be a powerful motivating force to continually seek new answers to old questions with an understanding that scientific dogma will, almost by definition, be always incomplete. Augustine viewed curiosity as sinful.[11] However, our knowledge that "the Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens" (Proverbs 3:19) suggests that God is the ultimate scientist, not the ultimate magician. This understanding should spur us on to unending pursuit of the explanation of everything, whether by scientific or spiritual means, as we are commanded to "be instructed more perfectly … of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass" (D&C 88:78–79). In addition, it seems to me that any understanding of the "how" of creation is sterile without an understanding of the "why." Leonardo da Vinci is reported to have said, "It's not enough that you believe what you see. You must also understand what you see."[12] As Elder Oaks has stated, "Those who do not learn 'by study and also by faith' (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118) limit their understanding of truth to what they can verify by scientific means. That puts artificial limits on their pursuit of truth."[13] Of course the opposite is equally true — limiting our understanding of the truth to those fragments of knowledge that can be gleaned from revealed scripture puts similarly unnecessary limits on our pursuit of truth and our ultimate progress. My experience suggests that a more thorough understanding of the strengths and limitations of the scientific method would serve many Latter-day Saints well and dispel much distrust of the scientific approach to truth seeking. In addition, just as the serious scientist takes great care to limit his conclusions to those

11. Beth Haile, "Casey Anthony and the Vice of Curiosity," Current Events, Catholic Moral Theology (website), July 4, 2011, https://catholicmoraltheology.com/casey-anthony-and-the-vice-of-curiosity/#:~:text=Augustine%20regarded%20curiosity%20as%20%E2%80%9Cconcupiscence%20of%20the%20eyes%E2%80%9D,definition%2C%20identifies%20curiosity%20as%20a%20vice%20against%20temperance.

12. Leonardo da Vinci, "Leonardo da Vinci Quotes," *AZquotes*, https://www.azquotes.com/author/15101-Leonardo_da_Vinci.

13. Dallin H. Oaks, "*Truth and the Plan,*" *Ensign* 48 (November 2018): 25, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2018/11/saturday-morning-session/truth-and-the-plan.

fully supported by the data, the man or woman of faith must continually take great care to avoid promulgating untruths by creating new doctrine from vaguely defined scriptural sketches. Of course, we want to know more, but unfortunately, stretching conjecture into dogma does little in this regard, and is generally harmful in the long run.

Finally, to again quote Elder Oaks, "Jesus Christ *is* the Only Begotten and Beloved Son of God. … He *is* our Savior from sin and death. This is the most important knowledge on earth."[14] To allow ourselves to become discouraged or distracted by a question about any other, less important truth seems very shortsighted. While there is a logical answer to every question, our current understanding of that answer is often obscured by the limited perspective available to us as mortals. As we consider the almost evangelical atheism with which some current writers promote their (dis)belief, it seems wise to consider the observation that fanaticism is generally born of doubt and is often an attempt at self-persuasion.

We have admittedly come a long way, both scientifically and spiritually, in the millennium since our proto-scientist made his observations of the movement of the sun around the earth. However, both scientific and religious arrogance continue to be dangerous to the serious seeker of truth; to reject anything out of hand because we cannot understand it is shortsighted. As Daniel Boorstin observed, "The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge."[15] In terms of a complete understanding of both scientific truths and religious miracles, we still live in the olden days.

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14. Dallin H. Oaks, "*Teachings of Jesus,*" *Ensign* 41 (November 2011): 90, 93, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2011/11/sunday-afternoon-session/teachings-of-jesus.

15. Daniel J. Boorstin, Quotable Quote, Goodreads.com, https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/68927-the-greatest-enemy-of-knowledge-is-not-ignorance-it-is.