



## Whose Motivation? Which Good?

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Why do we do what we do? This is a question that can be mundane: Why did I use the French press rather than the drip coffee maker this morning? Why did I go to the gym? The question can be tinged with more significance: Why did we get married so young? Why did we have children? Why did we have so many? (This question presses with different urgency at different times.) Why did we immigrate to the United States? Why haven't we become citizens? The question can also be asked for a whole society: Why don't we pursue immigration reform? Why are we still at war in Afghanistan? Why do we consume cheese in such alarming quantities?

"Why do people do anything they do? What moves or compels people to action?" This is the fundamental question Christian Smith, a sociologist of religion at the University of Notre Dame, asks in his latest methodological manifesto, *To Flourish or Destruct*. It is, he suggests, one of the most important questions of the social sciences, since they aim to describe and explain human action.

And unless the social sciences offer a theoretical account of human *motivation*, he argues, they will never truly describe or explain social life.

This conviction is as old as the social sciences themselves. Indeed, while reading Smith's book I was often reminded of Wilhelm Dilthey's 1883 *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (though, admittedly, this might also be the result of Smith's rather Teutonic penchant for architectonics and encyclopedic taxonomies). Dilthey

was cautioning against the scaled-down "subject" bequeathed to us by modern philosophy. "No real blood flows in the veins of the knowing subject constructed by Locke, Hume, and Kant," he lamented. Any approach to "whole human beings," he counseled, would require explanations that recognize "the manifold powers of a being that wills, feels, and thinks."

According to Smith, dominant paradigms in the social sciences have largely abandoned this conviction. Indeed, he thinks we've lost any sense of human action as motivated—or at least our theories don't adequately address the primacy and complexity of human motivations.

*To Flourish or Destruct:  
A Personalist Theory of  
Human Goods, Motivations,  
Failure, and Evil*

By Christian Smith  
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If human actions are indeed motivated, yet our theories fail to account well for motivations, then our social scientific descriptions of human persons are not only inadequate but also distort our self-understandings of persons. That can have big negative moral and political consequences. Any humanistic society presupposes that people are to a significant extent the responsible agents of their own actions. If we lose a thick sense of the reality of motivated action, we lose a humanism worth defending.

Your actions are not mere effects of social forces, Smith is saying, despite what most social science theory might tell you. (While his primary target is social scientific theory, it's hard to shake a sense that Smith's critique is obliquely directed at policymakers—for instance when he writes of “social-science consumers”—who fail to take agency and responsibility seriously and instead reduce humans to effects of systems.) To the extent that our theoretical models diminish human agency we will fail to adequately describe, explain, and hence predict human action. In short, we will be poor social scientists. To be effective and insightful, the social sciences need to recover the *person*. Thus Smith offers “personalism” as the answer to a question most people aren't asking.

Smith's book continues a methodological project begun in earlier volumes, starting with *Moral, Believing*

*Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (2003), a volley fired into the camps of both rational choice theorists and evolutionary psychologists—two dominant schools of thought in the social sciences with pretensions to explaining human behavior by explaining away complexity, consciousness, and culture. For rational choice theorists, all action boils down to calculated self-interest; for evolutionary psychology, everything you do is driven by the Darwinian mechanism of reproductive fitness. Aiming at any and every reductionism, Smith argued for a more robust, full-orbed, yea *human* understanding of persons. This translated into a brief for the significance of culture in shaping human action, including the significance of beliefs, myths, and religion.

But this was also a challenge to the positivism of the social sciences—their claims to neutrality and objectivity—and their foundationalist view of knowledge, which holds that our understanding of human action can be established on a firm empirical basis. In that book, Smith writes that

at bottom we humans are all really believers. The lives that we live and the knowledge we possess are based crucially on sets of basic assumptions and beliefs that themselves cannot be empirically verified or established with certainty, that are not universal, and for which no “deeper,” more objective or independent, common

body of facts or knowledge exists to adjudicate between.

Sometime after this little book was published, however, Smith became enamored with “critical realism” as a way to have his post-foundationalist cake yet eat it with claims to universality, too. Critical realism offers an alternative to foundationalist views of knowledge by owning up to the fallibility of human knowing (hence “critical”) without giving up on a sense of *real* human, social, and cultural universals, thus staving off the threat of a relativism that clearly perturbs Smith. The result was his copious articulation in *What Is a Person?* (2010) of what he describes as the un-Occamistic principle of “sufficient complexity”: that only a social science that begins with a sufficiently complex account of human nature and motivation will adequately “explain” the social. This might look like a fuller development of *Moral, Believing Animals* but it actually repudiates key aspects of his earlier argument (a regrettable turn, I’ve argued elsewhere).

*To Flourish or Destruct* is the sequel to *What Is a Person?* Indeed, readers of both books may tire of how much ground is retraced in the new book. But Smith’s quarrel in *To Flourish or Destruct* is different. If *What Is a Person?* argued for the irreducible complexity of human persons—and hence human behavior, action, and institutions—*To Flourish or Destruct*

argues for the *primacy* of the person as pre-social. Persons have an agency—and hence motivations—that precede any social construction or conditioning. Persons are *born*, not made. In short, Smith is out to revivify nothing less than a realist account of human nature—an endeavor he thinks will be widely dismissed as quixotic. But Smith will revel in the charge, methinks. (The Hebrew Bible includes a story of the prophet Elijah, who tends toward despair precisely because he sees himself as the lone defender of truth. “I alone am left” is Elijah’s rather whiny tune. Even those who fundamentally agree with Smith might get weary of his Elijah syndrome. He seems to think that having no theoretical allies is evidence of the truth of his position—the contrarian’s refuge.)

On Smith’s account, contemporary social science is largely captive to what he calls “social situationism.” Hardly anyone actually espouses this view, he admits (surely a first red flag). It is rather a tacit set of theoretical assumptions that is “amorphous.” “Despite or perhaps because of that fact, however, its influence has become significant,” Smith claims. “Although few sociologists today explicitly label themselves ‘social situationists,’ many have absorbed much of its outlook.” Readers are not at fault if this sounds to them a little bit like the proverbial “vast left-wing conspiracy” (and I say this as someone who usually tends to agree with

Smith). At the end of the day, the villains are still a bit vague.

Much of the book's third chapter is a litany of quotations that allegedly build up the evidence for the existence of this "social situationist" outlook and its dominance in the social sciences. According to Smith's summary, social situationists believe "people as *people* are the products of the social interactions in which they engage"; that all their "doings are *social*—not personal, interior, or private"; and that "people's actions and practices are *not motivated* by real, internal, subjective entities" or even that "human activities are simply not the kind of things that are motivated."

The trick is finding anyone who would really sign up for the positions that Smith is rejecting (he has a bit of a tendency to pierce through to what people "really" think despite their avowed statements to the contrary). If we can't, then what we're dealing with are only caricatures.

Let's take just one example of how Smith generates the view he attributes to social situationists. "In social situationism," he restates, "human persons are entirely dependent upon and defined by *social* life." Now there is a lot riding on this "entirely." So what is the evidence that people hold such a view? Smith immediately cites Sheldon Stryker's *Symbolic Interactionism*:

"If the social person is shaped by interaction," Stryker tells us, "it

is social structure that shapes the possibilities for interaction and so, ultimately, the person." Therefore, "there can be no sociological reference to the social person without coordinate reference to at least some aspects of social organization."

Do the quotes from Stryker provide evidence for the view Smith attributes to him? I don't think so. Note two important qualifiers. First, Stryker explicitly qualifies his focus: he is talking about the *social* person, the person relevant to social scientific analysis. Second, while he does make an ultimate claim that Smith seizes upon, Stryker's claim is about *shaping* more than it is about persons: claiming that persons are "ultimately" shaped by social life is simply not equivalent to saying that they are *entirely* dependent upon and defined by it, as Smith attributes. The irony is that Smith faults situationists for overstatement: "Situationism overstates and misunderstands the ways in which persons are shaped by their societies." But more often than not it looks like Smith is the one overstating.

It's this kind of slipperiness that undercuts any confidence that Smith has "really" summarized a view that social scientists actually espouse. Instead, he seems to have conjured a foe. This is only confirmed when Smith offers his alternative formulation in a section titled, "What Situationists Could Have Said That

Would Have Been Right.” His reformulation opens with a claim eerily similar to the one he hopes to rebut: “People are profoundly influenced by the social interactions in which they engage.” My hunch is that Stryker, Erving Goffman, and most theorists save Judith Butler types would happily sign on to this formulation and would not identify with the views Smith attributes to them. One almost suspects that the fault of Stryker & Co. is just that they don’t use the word “ontological” enough—that they need to make their claims and add the adjective “really.” But Smith’s argument needs a foil and a foe.

To summarize thus far: Smith believes that a “significant number of sociologists” are influenced by the view he calls “social situationism,” which “wrongly and impossibly denies the reality of genuinely motivated human action,” defining it instead entirely as a product of social interaction. The fix, according to Smith, is a package deal of realism, personalism, and neo-Aristotelian teleology.

*Realism* is the bulwark against constructivism run amok—the wantonly relativist notion that we can just make up the world. Persons possess “ontological being,” Smith asserts. I’m not sure the adjective “ontological” adds much to the word “being,” but Smith clearly does because he uses the word constantly. In his conclusion, for example, Smith empha-

sizes that “motivations consist ontologically of complexes of beliefs, desires, and emotions.” Adding the word “ontologically” doesn’t magically make your claim persuasive. Smith seems to think the contrarian move of merely asserting “reality” is its own sort of argument. This might explain why his book tends to be long on stipulation and short on justification.

*Personalism* refuses the heresy of “sociologism,” which assumes that human persons are entirely the effects of systems, institutions, and culture, dissolving the person into the social. In contrast, Smith is “prioritizing the person over the social.” Human persons are the basic, primary actors and agents in social life. “The actions of persons are what animate, energize, and drive social life.” He admits that, “Of course, social structures and institutions also emerge into real being at an ontologically higher level than that of persons as a result of emergent human activity.” And those emergent social structures effect downward causation on human persons. “But all social structures and institutions are *emergently* dependent upon the ongoing activity of human persons, whereas human persons are only *contextually* and *developmentally* dependent upon the social structures and institutions that nurture and sustain (or perhaps exclude, exploit, and destroy) them.” To translate: while persons are dependent upon social structures for their nurture and development, they

are “ontologically” prior, although why this matters remains elusive.

*Teleology* stipulates the orientation of these pre-social persons: “Persons are by nature ‘centers with purpose.’” This is the neo-Aristotelian moment of Smith’s account. As Aristotle put it, every agent acts for some end, some *telos*. More specifically, our action aims at some good, or at least what we perceive to be good. What *motivates* human action, then, is this pull of the good. Smith writes that “Human life is oriented toward certain ends, which motivations provide the energy, direction, and focus to realize or fulfill. We commit no theoretical crime by thinking teleologically. But we need to focus the telic emphasis of our theories not on ‘society’...but on *persons*, on what they are trying to achieve in their lives.” Smith seems to skate over a perennial philosophical debate by arguing that even when humans “choose the bad” they are still drawn toward “the proper human good”—this is at least a highly contestable claim, even amongst Aristotelians. To say humans are oriented to *some* end, to what they perceive to be the good, is not equivalent to saying that all human beings are motivated to pursue the *same* end. The latter—which is Smith’s contention—is dubious.

Smith believes these theoretical commitments—realism, personalism, and teleology—hang together as an all-or-nothing package, a kind of three-legged stool. But this cer-

tainly isn’t the case. For example, as I’ve argued in *Who’s Afraid of Relativism?* (2014), one could have a robust conviction about both human nature and the substance of the Good without buying into Smith’s “realism,” which assumes a specific (and problematic) epistemology. The problem isn’t with making claims about *the way things are*. Rather, the problem is that Smith ties this to a picture of knowledge as representation that has been roundly criticized by philosophers from Wittgenstein to Charles Taylor. While I agree, for example, that social science would be better science if it started from the assumption that human beings are hungry souls who are religious by nature, I don’t think any epistemological acrobatics will universally confirm that claim apart from showing how it better makes sense of the world. In other words, I think the Christian Smith of *Moral, Believing Animals* was right: the best social science will be robust and value-laden but also non-foundationalist.

Here I think we can identify what’s frustrating about Smith’s argument: it is quixotic not because it is doomed to noble failure but because he is for the most part battling figments of his own imagination, tilting at the windmills of social situationism while defending realism and personalism. His vaguely conjured enemies dissolve like mist when you try to pin them down. I’m not at all convinced that “relativism” is a great problem

facing contemporary social science. Maybe this was a live option in the deconstructive 1990s, but today it's modernity's overconfidence in its knowledge of the Good that is more likely the problem. Smith is focused on refuting relativism when he should be focused on the *substance of the Good*. The real battles lie in the realm of *teleology*—and those are fights worth having.

What are the norms for human flourishing? How do we negotiate disagreement about the substance of the Good? These issues will then in turn raise philosophical questions about the *sources* for specifying such norms—what Charles Taylor describes as the “sources of the self.” For Aristotle, we are able to articulate the *telos* of human action by drawing on a larger moral tradition; or as Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, the specification of the Good depends on the narratives of some specified tradition. But in that case, the specification of the Good is not something that can be just read off the data. Neither can the Good be objectively specified by appealing to something like “natural law.” Smith sees his personalism as “positioned within the broad natural law tradition.” But appeals to natural law often feel like a sort of metaphysical positivism: “Here are the facts; deal with it.”

At times it appears that Smith is simply pressing social scientists to be coherent—to recognize

they implicitly assume something like personalism, to stop disavowing it and be honest and forthright in their beliefs about the *telos* of human flourishing. That's a legitimate critique, and one that Smith has been pressing in his theoretical works ever since *Moral, Believing Animals*. On this front, the bogeyman is not constructionism or antirealism but rather the persistent myth of the neutrality of social science. “The discipline of sociology,” Smith concludes, “has generally tried either to remain neutral on an account of human goods and flourishing or has promoted an antinaturalistic cultural and moral relativism.” But this isn't really honest or sustainable, Smith points out. “Incongruously, however, most sociologists are also personally motivated in their scholarly work and teaching by visions of and desire to promote particular views of human flourishing in which they really believe.” Ay, there's the rub: it's less whether social scientists are committed to specific visions of the Good, and more a matter of recognizing the status of these visions as *beliefs*. “So it is inconsistent if not disingenuous for sociologists to reject the idea, as I have advocated here, of the discipline being grounded upon a substantive account of a teleological human good. The only question that remains, then, is *which account is best*.” Yes, precisely. Which is why the first two thirds of Smith's book expend wasted energy on the claims

that most sociologists believe human motivation isn't grounded in reality. The resulting "realism" engenders Smith's own overconfidence in the last third of the book where he thinks he is merely *describing* the Good, short-circuiting a genuine conversation and debate between competing *beliefs* about the Good. Social situationists have beliefs about the Good but aren't honest about it, whereas Smith seems to think realism and natural law give him access to the Good *beyond* belief. That's a bit of a conversation stopper.

Smith's fixation on ontology perhaps explains a remarkably glaring omission from his account—the complete absence of any engagement with the new behavioral economics of Richard Thaler, Daniel Kahneman, Cass Sunstein, and others. Smith's personalism—his claim that humans have motivations, and that such motivations are universal, objective, and prior to social

formation—pays no attention to how motivations are primed and formed. Whether human beings have motivations is not nearly as interesting or controversial as Smith seems to think. But what generates human motivations? How are motivations formed and acquired? How are motivations shared and inherited? How do motivations seep into us as habits? These are questions generating some of the most fascinating work in economics and psychology and other sectors of social science, for there is a new appreciation for a kind of teleology in these discussions. This is surely a missed opportunity—and a sign of work that still needs to be done.

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