ARTICLES

113  Michael Kunnen and Clayton Carlson, Deeply Connected to God’s Good World, the Human Microbiome

127  Chad P. Stutz, Wisława Szymborska, Adolf Hitler, and Boredom in the Classroom; or, How Yawning Leads to Genocide

REFLECTION

145  Eli J. Knapp, Intelligently Designed Discussion: My Journey through Intellectual Fear in Higher Education

REVIEW AND RESPONSE


161  Christian Smith, Response to Paul Sullins

165  Paul Sullins, Response to Christian Smith

EXTENDED REVIEW

167  David P. King, Charity Detox

REVIEW ESSAY

173  Jeremy S. Stirm, Moral Injury: Narrating Life after War

REVIEWS

187  Alan P. R. Gregory, Science Fiction Theology: Beauty and the Transformation of the Sublime
Reviewed by Kevin John Frank Pinkham

190  Jonathan Grant, Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age
Reviewed by Brad A. Lau
112  PAUL R. HOUSE, Bonhoeffer’s Seminary Vision: A Case for Costly Discipleship and Life Together
   Reviewed by Stephen L. Woodworth

   Reviewed by Joshua R. Sweeden

197  SOONG-CHAN RAH, Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times
   Reviewed by David M. Johnstone

200  HAROLD HEIE, A Future for American Evangelicalism: Commitment, Openness, and Conversation
   Reviewed by William B. Evans

203  HANS MADUEME AND MICHAEL REEVES, eds., Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives
   Reviewed by Steven D. Mason

206  MICHAEL NORTHCOTT, Place, Ecology, and the Sacred: The Moral Geography of Sustainable Communities
   Reviewed by Steven Bouma-Prediger

207  MICHAEL E. CAFFERKY, Business Ethics in Biblical Perspective: A Comprehensive Introduction
   Reviewed by Walton Padelford

Educational Copying Beyond Fair Use: Our policy on educational copying beyond fair use can be found at http://www.csreview.org/educational_copying.html.
As is well known, in contrast to Plato’s theory that the universal forms of the things we experience exist in an ideal realm (idealism) of which we had knowledge prior to experiencing them, Aristotle thought that they did not exist apart from the things themselves (realism) and could only be recognized by induction after experiencing them. Science, for Aristotle, consists in the endeavor to discern and classify the universal character (or being or reality, the Greek word “on”), of the welter of existing things under the many various categories and relations that we can recognize. But we must also give account of being itself apart from any attributes, or on-tology. Being, on this view, consists of all the subjects that we could know or study, but without any of the predicates that delimited the studies of the particular sciences. As the many forms of predicated being are induced from experience with things, so the unified notion of being qua being is induced from the experience of science.
In several recent books, sociologist Christian Smith presents the case for critical realism in science, which proposes to reverse Aristotle’s procedure. Critical realism, according to Smith (hereafter “CRAS”), argues that a proper ontology, or apprehension of being itself, is necessary to understand correctly any of the more limited or predicated instances of being examined in the various sciences. Although it is social science that is mostly in view, CRAS is presented as a general critique of the entire project of current modern science.

Science today, according to CRAS, is severely limited by the adoption of ontologies that are “fatally flawed.” The critical philosophies of Hume, Kant, and Descartes, and the rise of epistemological positivism, have corroded confidence in knowing anything beyond sense experience, or perhaps cognition, leaving the modern intellectual project without access to transcendence. Essences, substances, and causes are mental constructions which may help us understand or cope with experience (idealism) or deceive us regarding it (empiricism), but do not pertain to an objective reality.

In the four books considered in this review, Smith offers hard-hitting critiques of the secularist assumptions of cultural anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture (hereafter “MBA”) makes the case that every social order is also an expression of moral or sacred ideas, identities, and orientations, expressed both in personal ideals and social institutions. The rejection of structural functionalism in favor of objective, positive knowledge of society in the mid-20th century left the sociology of culture with an uneasy amalgam of cultural relativism and rational choice theory, unable to provide a convincing explanation of human motivations. Rather than objectivity, Smith argues that

the knowledge we possess [is] 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. (MBA 150)

Thus “[w]e are all inescapably trusting, believing animals” (MBA 150), and “every social order has the sacred at its core” (MBA 152).

In The Sacred Project of American Sociology (“SPAS”) Smith argues that although American sociology presents itself as a secular, scientific enterprise, it is actually engaged in a spiritual quest, based on a philosophy of persons as autonomous, self-directing, and self-empowering which is held sacred—unspoken, universally assumed, and not permitted to be challenged—within the discipline. It has consequently become a pastiche of liberal reformist ideologies which Smith characterizes as “modern liberal-Enlightenment-Marxist-social-reformist-pragmatist-therapeutic-sexually liberated-civil rights-feminist-GLBTQ-social constructionist-poststructuralist/postmodernist” (SPAS 11, italics in original) which find common ground in the attempt, not just to study society, but to promote personal and social transformation.

What is a Person? ("WIAP") presents Smith’s most extensive introduction to
Christian Sociology? The Critical Realist Personalism of Christian Smith

CRAS and critique of alternative modernist epistemologies, pursuant to setting forth the structural elements of an allied theory of human personhood, that is, “critical realist personalism” (thus included in references to “CRAS”), which is developed further with a theory of agency in To Flourish or Destruct (“TFD”).

In opposition to prevailing ideas in the social sciences, which see humans as autonomous individuals whose lives are determined by their place in a social order which expresses ideology and power, CRAS affirms that persons are irreducibly relational beings who generate social structures, which thus relate to universal features of human nature, including moral norms. Human persons seek to flourish, that is, to fulfill their personhood, by pursuing certain basic goods and interests in the context of, or interaction with, the structures of society.

CRAS criticizes modern social science for seeking to explain complex human phenomena with short, simple explanations, an error which Smith emphatically avoids. His root definition of “person” is

a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subject experience, durable identity, moral commitment and social communication who—as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible actions and interactions—exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the nonpersonal world. (WIAP 103)

The “complex capacities” referred to are 30 in number, presented in five levels of complexity (existence, primary experience, secondary experience, creating, and highest order capacities) (WIAP 54, Table 1), elaborated by over 40 specific causal relationships (WIAP 74, Figure 3), which enable the emergence of personhood as something greater than the sum of its parts.

The action of human persons is motivated by six basic goods and interests—physical survival; security and pleasure; knowledge of reality; identity coherence and affirmation; exercising purposive agency; moral affirmation; and social belonging and love (TFD 190)—in interaction with social structures, which are
durable patterns of human social relations, generated and reproduced through social interactions and accumulated and transformed historically over time, that are expressed through lived bodily practices, which are defined by culturally meaningful cognitive categories, motivated in part by normative and moral valuations and guides, capacitated by and imprinted in material resources and artifacts, controlled and reinforced by regulative sanctions, which therefore promote cooperation and conformity and discourage resistance and opposition. (WIAP 326)

The point of all this is that human nature, social structures, and moral norms are real, with a definable character and causal power that shape human life. Personhood, WIAP elaborates, is an emergent property of human capacities, the fulfillment of which in freedom and autonomy forms the chief purpose of human life and society. TFD argues that human actions stem from a motivation to realize what Smith calls “natural human goods”: ends that are, by nature, constitutionally good for all human beings, and thus consistent with human dignity. Evil results
from the failure to realize these ends. Thus CRAS ambitiously situates the idea of personhood at the center of our attempts to understand how we might shape good human lives and societies.

For a Christian scholar, there is much to affirm in Smith’s work. CRAS sets forth a form of natural law eudaimonism that is similar to many Christian philosophical anthropologies, and certainly presents a better explanation of human life and meaning, in most regards, than hedonism or relativism. Smith observes that his “account would not unfairly be understood as a secular analogue to other natural law accounts that may be religiously oriented” (TFD 25).

However, it is emphatically not a religious or Christian account of human life, or even one which includes reference to transcendence. Smith informs us (WIAP 10, footnote) that he is giving an account of the ontology of human persons, “which belong to the natural order,” without reference to God, “because God, in my understanding, is radically transcendent and so not bound by nature’s space, time, material being, or laws.” There is, on this view, no comprehension or application of the Christian ideas of creation or incarnation, by which God is connected with nature and space-time. The natural properties of human beings include a soul, by which Smith “simply mean[s] the noncorporeal dimensions of human persons, which, again, belong to the natural world.” They do not, apparently, also include a spirit, in the sense of a capacity for relationship with God or orientation to transcendence as expressed by most Christian theologies. (Smith suggests, in fact, that “spirit” could be used as a synonym for “soul.”)

This blindness to transcendence is probably the greatest weakness of CRAS, and thus will form the bulk of my critique. A theory which asserts strong views of ontology, emergent personhood, and real norms of human dignity cannot then reject or ignore transcendence without revealing a kind of reductionistic naturalism that distorts its perspective. Even Aristotle, whose ontology CRAS resembles in many respects, recognized that the nature of reality predisposed a creator (though perhaps Hegel, minus the idealism, is a better exemplar here). If, as CRAS claims, reality is that which causes; causes are emergent like the tree from the acorn; and entities are interdependent, not autonomous; then what is the emergent cause of the sum of reality? Or, to cite evidence Smith, an eminent scholar of religion, must know quite well, how do we account for the fact that human societies are ineluctably and almost universally religious? If observed human behavior, through retroduction, allows us to apprehend, truly albeit imperfectly, the reality of the human soul, dignity, and morality, why does not the apprehension of the reality of the soul, dignity, and morality also allow us to apprehend, truly albeit imperfectly, the reality corresponding to aspirations to a higher purpose for human life than merely human life itself? To ignore these questions takes a fairly radical naturalism, the limitations of which reverberate throughout Smith’s theory.

For example, Smith struggles, and never fully succeeds, to give a coherent account of human evil, which, he acknowledges, poses “a most problematic challenge for my teleological personalism” (TFD 223). Evil, according to CRAS, stems
from a failure to thrive or flourish on the part of some, in this sense a privation of good that results, in part, from a broken social order:

Achieving human flourishing requires a specific set of resources, experiences, and efforts.... People who benefit from and take advantage of the requisites of flourishing stand a good chance of thriving. But the default outcome for those who do not enjoy and capitalize upon these resources, experiences, and efforts is personal failure, stagnation, and degeneration. In some cases, people become evil. (TFD 223)

CRAS asserts (following Aristotle), moreover, that while a few people enact the good, and a few become evil, the mass of persons “do not... undertake the difficult journey toward personal flourishing” (TFD 241), remaining undeveloped in their personhood.

But it is not accurate, empirically or ontologically, to say that most people are latently good, with a few realizing it more fully and a few realizing the lack of good more fully. Rather, what we know of human life and behavior suggests another view: that all persons are devoted to both good and evil and struggle with the conflict and tension between them in their own person. As the late novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn famously put it, in an account of a terribly evil social order: “Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts.”

This is, of course, the claim of the Christian doctrine of original sin, though most religions make a similar claim. The claim could easily be falsified empirically, but never has been, which suggests that the burden of proof rests on those who claim that some are evil and others are not. Is there a single person without evil, who has never failed to flourish in some respect? If so, let Smith present the evidence. And if the presence of evil, or behavior inconsistent with one’s own flourishing, is part of the experience of every person, then it cannot simply be a privation of human being, the result of blocked or impaired capacity in some cases, but, as a universally observed feature of humans on Aristotle’s terms, must be part of human nature itself. Humans fail to flourish not primarily because the social order is broken (though that may contribute to the failure, and we should work to improve it), but because we are broken, or (to move to the Christian image) we live in exile from our true selves.

Moreover, if failure to flourish is natural, yet we also seek to flourish, our telos cannot be that which is presented by CRAS, basically happiness due to self-expression and virtue in human relationships, since ontologically, no real being exists to thwart its own nature. CRAS, in fact, never addresses the central scientific question, by its own account, regarding human personhood: Why are humans persons (and not something else)? Since we are created beings, the question becomes, why were we created with personhood? Christianity provides a cogent and

comprehensible answer, which also points us to the proper telos of human nature. We are persons, and not something else, because we were created, not merely for human relationships, but for relationship—communion and union—with God.

CRAS’s naturalism is evidenced in other, striking, omissions. Religion and religious institutions are simply not included in CRAS’s otherwise meticulously comprehensive account of the conditions for human flourishing. The full explication of this observed orientation to transcendent meaning is not accessible to science, of course, but its existence in human life is one of the most well-attested findings of social research. Every social order on earth expresses a recognizable sense of the sacred and a solemnization of meaning beyond death; a fact which Smith has articulated elsewhere more than once. There is also no mention of family or kinship, though these are also universal features of society and most persons would acknowledge them as primary influences on personhood and flourishing. These omissions are not exotic features of (what may be thought) a partisan religiously-informed sociology. The classic sociologist Émile Durkheim, no narrow religionist or metaphysician, recognized both the centrality of religion and the universality of moral failure in society. Rather, the omissions signify a commitment, despite the emphasis on ontology, realism, and personhood, to exclude any notion of transcendent meaning.

In sum, CRAS aspires to build a theoretical space for human dignity and metaphysical reality in modern social science, which is a very good thing. It has the not inconsiderable merit of advancing, in an academic field sorely bereft of it, some of the Aristotelian tradition’s wider and older wisdom on human life, though I suspect that Aristotle without CRAS may offer even better wisdom. It also presents an aggressive challenge to dominant forms of thinking whose reductionism is more advanced than its own.

According to Smith, CRAS offers an alternative to sociology’s sacred project of human liberation because it presents human happiness as achieved through the development of personhood based in a telic human nature rather than through individual autonomy and unrestrained self-determination. But in the end, CRAS just presents another version, perhaps more accurate, certainly more complicated, of the same sacred project. Though his understanding of “improving” in the next clause may be very different, the goal of Smith’s sociological efforts is to promote human happiness as a product of improving social structures and personal behavior or relationships, just as it is (Smith argues) for the field of sociology as a whole. Despite claims to be radically different, CRAS offers but another example of what Charles Taylor has called “exclusive humanism,” that is, an account of human life that offers significance without transcendence.

---

Paul Sullins raises interesting questions about my critical realist personalism. But his critique reflects some confusions. Let me answer his easier criticisms first. I indeed make no distinction between human soul and spirit, seeing no need for such a difference either theologically or psychologically. I also, in fact, do not theorize religion in the two lengthier books reviewed above (though I do have an entire chapter on religion in MBA and repeatedly attend to the importance of religion in SPAS). However, my next book (Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters, Princeton University Press, 2017) advances a theory of religion from the perspective of critical realist personalism, so that “neglect” will soon be remedied. On the question of evil, Sullins confuses a theological account of the human condition before God and of the universal human potential for both good and evil (with which I have no quarrel) with my focused analysis of human failure to realize our natural telic ends broadly and the actualization of radical evil among certain people but not others (it is one thing to say that all humans are infected with the evil of sin, but quite another to explore why some people become Hitlers and Stalins and others Bonhoeffers and Solzhenitsyns). And, finally, yes, personalism is absolutely and explicitly a humanist theory, but not “exclusively” so, as I show below.

Is my critical realist personalism not a Christian or religious theory, as Sullins says? It depends on what that means. There are many ways for non-theological theoretical accounts of some part of reality to be “Christian.” Consider, for example, the distinction between (1) baseline compatibility, (2) constructive formation, and (3) maximal elaboration. The first approach employs Nicholas Wolterstorff’s idea of Christian faith as an “acceptance-governing principle” (Until Justice and Peace Embrace, William B. Eerdmans, 1983) to adjudicate which theories in (social) science Christians can and cannot accept; Christian sensibilities help scholars to sniff out theoretical assumptions and claims that they discern to be inadequate if not false, and so worth criticizing. The goals here are to sort out theories that are compatible with Christian commitments from those that are not, and so to help know where to advance research and where to aim criticism. The second of the three approaches above, construc-
tive formation, moves beyond issues of mere compatibility to allow Christian sensibilities to form constructive research programs and theories—not in the sense of “biasing” them, but of providing insightful leads, clues, hunches, and so forth (which Michael Polanyi and others have shown are crucial in science’s development; for an excellent illustration of this in anthropology, see Timothy Larsen, *The Slain God*, Oxford University Press, 2016). The third approach, maximal elaboration, would seek to explicate fully all of the Christian theological implications of a theory, to connect all the dots, fill in the entire picture, weaving science and theology integrally together in one theoretical work into one “worldview” whole.

At the very least, my critical realist personalism reflects a baseline compatibility with Christian faith. Even more, for those with the eyes to see it, my personalism reflects Christian influences in its constructive formation. Both of those are obvious to me and, I would think, any informed reader. But, as to the third approach, I am simply not interested in maximal elaboration. I do not believe it is necessary or helpful. In fact, the attempts at it that I have seen in sociology have been duds, in my view. So, if by a “Christian account” Sullins means maximal elaboration, then, no, my theory is not Christian, and happily not so. But to expect only that to count as Christian is too narrow and exacting. Oddly, for a Catholic, Sullins’ position seems to reflect the more “every square inch” mentality of, say, Abraham Kuyper than the traditionally Catholic approach to faith and reason. The latter I think is better reflected in, for example, my approach to explaining human dignity in *WIAP*:

As to theistic accounts, I find some of them persuasive. But I also hope for a coherent account of dignity that does not depend exclusively on theistic beliefs. *My own reasons for believing in dignity are at rock bottom theistic.* But the defense of human dignity today and in the future will require more than only believers in God to support the cause. I am interested in a defensible account of dignity that bridges across as many people of good will as possible, one that includes as many discussion partners as it is able who believe in and want to protect human dignity. I think in part that if a good theistic account of human dignity is valid, then we should expect that it explains on the human side of the divine-human relationship to show up and be discernible in lived human life. Human dignity, even _if_ its ultimate source is in God, should disclose itself in various this-worldly experiences, signs, and evidences that even people who cannot believe in God may observe and about which they might rationally theorize. My intention is to offer a few hopefully useful ideas and arguments to contribute to these larger, shared, bridge-building observations, discernments, and reflections toward the articulation of a more adequate account of the grounds of human dignity than we have today. (452, italics added)

What in that, I ask, is closed or blind to transcendence?

More broadly, critical realism is the philosophy of science most open to spiritual realities, about which much as been written. Critical realism’s depth ontology and anti-empiricism argue that the most important and powerful entities in reality are actually invisible, not directly observable by human senses. Critical realism is resolutely anti-reductionist. Questions of self-transcendence, truth, goodness, and natural telic ends stand at the center of personalism. I can-
not understand Sullins’ critique on this point. Simply because I do not spell out every possible theological connection and implication does not mean I have collapsed into a reductionistic naturalism. In fact, I have repeatedly defended the reasonableness of belief in God. For example, in MBA I spend many pages arguing against a purely naturalistic account for the origins of human religion, concluding that, “I am inclined to…maintain the parsimonious theistic explanation as my proposed theory” (117, but then I also go on, as in the quote above, to offer a more inclusive approach to broaden the conversations).

In short, while reading some aspects of my theoretical program clearly, I think Sullins has gotten my account wrong on his major points of criticism. Far from being the dead end for Christian scholars that he portrays, critical realist personalism offers an abundantly promising approach for those who wish to break out of the narrow confines of metaphysical naturalism, empiricism, materialism, positivism, anti-mentalism, and postmodern relativism into more fruitful avenues of research and teaching.
Christian Smith considers it “too narrow and exacting” to require that Christian scholarship seek to “weav[e] science and theology integrally together.” I, on the other hand, consider that to be the *sine qua non* of scholarship that is Christian. I am not suggesting that every individual work of Christian scholarship needs to articulate theological or philosophical commitments, much less be “maximally elaborated,” as Smith seems to suggest this demand entails. What I am proposing is that scholarship is Christian when, and only when, it reflects an understanding of life and the universe that engages the revelation of Jesus Christ. “Engages” here means not only that our reasoning and research are instructed by revealed truth, but also (and for scientists, perhaps more importantly) that we persistently seek to understand what we learn, according to our areas of competence, within the context of the whole of truth. Not necessarily in a single opus, and perhaps not ever attained fully, we should indeed nonetheless constantly seek to “fill in the entire picture … into one ‘worldview’ whole.” This is, to my mind, not optional for a scholar in Christ.

For thinking this, Smith deems me an odd Catholic, but I must decline the compliment; this concept (often termed “faith seeking understanding”) reflects the classic understanding of faith and reason of both the Catholic Church and the reformers. I first learned it at Wheaton College under the late Dr. Arthur Holmes. As we all know, but which bears repeating, its premise (though it certainly sounds odd to modern ears) is that all knowledge is integrated into a single, rationally accessible whole, a uni-verse, so that every discovery, concept, or theory calls us to a deeper understanding of the whole. Here, for example, is the appeal of the scholar-Pope John Paul II in the 1998 document on faith and reason *Fides et Ratio* (106):

> Finally, I cannot fail to address a word to *scientists*, whose research offers an ever greater knowledge of the universe as a whole and of the incredibly rich array of its component parts … I would urge them to continue their efforts without ever abandoning the *sapiential horizon* [where empirical knowledge gives way to what God has revealed] within which scientific and technological achievements are wedded to the philosophical and ethical values which are the distinctive and indelible mark of the human person. Scientists are well aware that “the search for truth . . . always points beyond to something higher than the immediate
object of study, to the questions which give access to Mystery.

Smith, lest the point get lost, extensively explores integration with secular values and goods in creative and insightful ways that are well worth reading; but he is clear that he is not interested in doing so with regard to Christian truth and seems genuinely baffled that I might expect this from a Christian scholar. He points out that he is personally a theist, and his aversion to integral Christian articulation in his theories is strategic, to be better able to ally with nonbelievers in advancing human dignity. What this response does not seem to understand, I think, is that Christian scholars are called to integrate discovered truth with revealed truth, not primarily to communicate or present it to others (though it does enable this) but to understand it ourselves. If we really do live in a universe created by God, then we do not really understand anything we discover here until we have “maximally elaborated” it, as best we can, in the light of God and his revelation. The goal is not primarily to make the faith reasonable, but reason faithful.

Moreover, as Kierkegaard warned us, the attempt to make faith “reasonable” to those who do not share it leads ineluctably to compartmentalizing or abandoning the less compatible elements of Christian belief, a tendency which is readily discernible in Smith’s thoughtful and clear response. Original sin is one thing; accounting for radical evil another. The spirit, not just the word but the very idea of a supernatural end for humans, disappears. Social science describes the observable “human side” of life, theology the unobservable “divine side.” One can personally affirm theism “at rock bottom” but not assert it as a necessary principle of the theory. Thus does faith become “domesticated,” its challenges blunted or ignored in the interest of less tension with other intellectual perspectives.

Smith also points out that CRAS is not as bad as materialist philosophies, in that one can acknowledge non-material realities and defend the reasonableness of belief in God. To sum up his arguments, if a Christian scholar wants a less bad philosophy that can be held for optionally theistic reasons and has at least a “baseline compatibility” with the Christian faith, she or he may want to consider CRAS. I encourage Christian scholars to aspire for more: to rediscover the universe and the power of Christian truth to reveal it. With CRAS one can, like Smith, explore the reasonableness of faith, which is not without merit; but one is not likely to be able to—or even, like Smith, to see the need to—explore the faithfulness of reason, which is the unique calling and challenge of Christian scholarship.