

## BOOK REVIEW

***To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil.* By Christian Smith, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015, 384 pp.**

*To Flourish or Destruct* provides a compelling discussion on a topic scarcely touched for many years, offering an alternate model for understanding human beings and their motivations in societal context. The author, Christian Smith, has written numerous books directed toward sociologists. This one is a follow up to his 2010 book, *What is a Person*. In the present work, Smith asserts that the standard views on integrating humankind with society are insufficient and shortsighted. We are shown that the accepted ways of viewing the relationship between the individual and society, especially the claim that human development and the individual are but consequences of the social, are only a small part of the picture. Smith insists that the person must be taken as the primary “fact” of social life. Accordingly, personhood is at the theoretical center of understanding humans in their social context. And, as we will see, Smith’s position has significant consequences.

This volume identifies and explicates several terms we read of only rarely in social and psychological studies, such as those addressing human motivation and the nature of human happiness. Connected with some of these ideas is an ambitious undertaking to develop a new theory integrating personhood and society. Smith begins with a background review of the past two centuries of work in this field. He accepts what appears to be reasonable, but is critical of all theories that reduce humans and their behavior to component parts. Smith contends that much of this reductionist theory has been accepted with little, if any, credible research to substantiate it. Furthermore, this volume asserts that the person must be studied and considered as a whole, rather than dissected into minute components. After all, most would agree that for most entities and systems, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Arguably, this assertion holds for humans as well. Smith explains that persons are dependent on society for their development, but not, as he puts it, “for their ontological personal being.”

Modern sociological theory seems to highlight the pessimistic side of human behavior, our irrational, emotional and even animal-like behavior. Smith takes a more optimistic view, siding with a minority of theorists like Maslow who stress the potential for an almost infinite positive development of persons. This view goes back to Aristotle whose ideas have begun to be resurrected by several modern philosophers. Aristotle asserts that human behavior is teleologically based, featuring an end state that is appropriate for humans, a state he simply calls “happiness.” Smith then discusses the reality of happiness as a realistic gauge of successful human living.

As a basis for his theory, Smith first gives his definition of “a person.” His person is “a being that under proper conditions is capable of developing into... a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral

commitment, and social communication who... sustain(s)... his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships" (35). Accordingly, a person, at his or her core, is not something independent, or simply a body, or something residing in a body. The person is the whole. Rather than reduce a person to his or her parts, the parts form a unity that provides for new emergent properties and capabilities that do not even exist at lower levels. "Personalism," as Smith calls it, asserts that "by nature," humans possess the capacity to excel in life – to flourish. Smith has not coined the term "flourish" in connection with human capacity, but the term is being used more by writers in the field, so he highlights the term as a goal for personhood. Persons, by nature and with respect to social interaction, can grow to full personhood. Personalism is less deterministic, but there are limitations and negative tendencies introduced by the environment. However, persons are capable of creativity which can surmount such barriers. There is human freedom, but there are limitations too. In summary, freedom and determinism are not mutually exclusive.

The value of this book lies in its theoretical underpinnings. Very little contemporary scientific research verifies or nullifies the book's hypothesis. Most current research consists of micro-studies of specific events in human life, with little connection to the whole person and society. Similarly, much sociology undertaken today does not have the lofty goal of personal growth that Smith and some humanitarian movements may have. Reductionism appears to be the current "fad" paradigm in social studies, so we would expect little help from current studies on the macro level suggested by Smith. The value of Smith's work, at this point, is specifying other ways of thinking about societal well-being.

Social theory today persistently insists that events outside the individual account for desire and motive, as if to say that what proceeds out of the individual is mostly irrelevant. Just as easily, a sociologist can maintain, as Smith does, that internal motives are immensely relevant. Though not directly observed, motives can be measured by their effects. Accordingly, we should be able to test whether human motives can be understood as having been influenced by society on the one hand, and by emotions with biological influences on the other. Furthermore, Smith draws attention to desires originating with the "person," which include survival and material needs. This explanation appears far more intuitive than to categorically maintain there is no motive mechanism at work internally within a person other than the biological.

Sociologists are taught that society is the prime motivational force. Without society, a person has limited motivation beyond mere survival. A reductionist interpretation, assumed but never proven, leads to viewing humans as mere animals and little more. If not careful, we may begin to interpret all events in this way. It is refreshing to have an alternate view promoted. To Smith, motives spring from humanity. What constitutes personhood is the realization we are *thinking* selves, having a *sense* of independence, a *built-in* in morality that gives us a sense of what is good, and the *desire* to belong to social groups. He stresses these are in-born – not socially constructed, but socially influenced.

Smith's research is impeccable and thorough. Hundreds of studies are referenced that appear to support his central thesis that there is an ontological nature to human "personalism."

Humans, by their very nature, seek what is good for self and others. They are self-developing and goal-seeking organisms. His other assertion stresses that humans have a real purpose in existence to develop “the fullness of flourishing personhood,” with a life of loving and caring relationships with other persons as a result. Flourishing, Smith asserts, takes effort and does not come automatically. The desire for growth is present by nature and will motivate the self as long as the person has the basic needs for survival provided, something that goes back to Greek philosophy. There are ultimate “goods” and “virtues,” as Plato suggested. And, as Aristotle discovered, there is one ultimate good to which humankind aspires. That goal we call “happiness,” something Smith operationalizes as “flourishing.”

The reader will immediately recognize the stark contrast between this book and current popular sociology. As a result, it is difficult to imagine that this theory will create major waves in academic sociology, though a book like this is long overdue. Sociology has gone to the extreme by uncritically embracing reductionism. The current fad is an explanation tending toward the biological in psychology, and ultimately tending toward societal forces in sociology. Smith’s is a much more balanced approach. He is very courageous to consider proposing a theory so far removed from current explanations. But, as stated, this alternative explanation is needed. In time, major shifts in methods for improving society will hopefully result from this more balanced approach. Hopefully, this theory encourages disadvantaged persons to strive and grow toward meaningful and full lives. Our current social helping system appears to be built on the assumption that humans are helpless apart from social structures that provide them with resources. Perhaps the first step might be to motivate what is already lying dormant within the ranks of the disadvantaged by helping them realize that persons in developed countries have all necessary ingredients present for human flourishing and happiness. The person must just supply desire to be a unique person contributing good for self and others, and then that desire can be nurtured.

Hopefully the book will contribute to an immensely needed paradigm shift in research conducted in the human sciences, but that will take time. In the meantime, those who take it to heart, and are willing to commit to the journey toward full flourishing, will be immensely rewarded even if they cannot coax others to follow this path. Much of modern philosophy is devoid of goals and purpose. There is direction and purpose here that provides what is lacking. While Smith himself did not coin the term “flourishing” for his concept of human striving, he has made a contribution to a movement that is still in its infancy. The potential is there to offer society practical suggestions for improvement. Christian Smith has taken some indispensable first steps in putting the person back into social studies.

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