

METHOD

Journal of Lonergan Studies, n.s.

Volume 5

Number 1

Spring 2014

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METHOD: Journal of Lonergan Studies

is published by the Lonergan Institute at Boston College

CRITICAL REALIST PERSONALISM: INTRODUCING A SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE WORK OF CHRISTIAN SMITH

R. J. Snell

Eastern University
Wayne, Pennsylvania

IN ADDITION TO his important work on American religion, particularly among adolescents and emerging adults, Christian Smith, the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame, has written several noteworthy texts on the philosophy of social science.¹

In a somewhat inchoate fashion in *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*, but explicitly in *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up*, and the recent *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil*, Smith defends “critical realist personalism” as the best methodological and substantive account of the human being.² In *What Is a Person?*, he draws upon (1) critical realism, especially as articulated by Roy Bhaskar, (2) personalism, referencing the Boston school but indebted particularly to the Continental variety of Mounier and Maritain, among others, and (3) the antinaturalistic phenomenological epistemology of Charles Taylor, to make his case that “we

¹For his work on American religion, see, for instance, Smith, and others, *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out of, and Gone from the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Smith, and others, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Young Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); *What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

should toss into the dustbin" the positivistic empiricism governing so much of social science.³ Further, Smith suggests that science properly understood allows for genuine realism, as opposed to mere predictive force, and we can know human nature and its various capacities as the conditions for an ontologically real human personhood, an Aristotelian account of the human good, and a normative defense of human dignity, unlike the competing alternatives of social constructionism, network structuralism, or variables analysis, all dominant theories in contemporary sociology.

For a student of Lonergan, at least six aspects of *What Is a Person?*, now generally regarded as a major contribution to its field, stand out as particularly interesting. First, critical realism. Like Lonergan, Smith rejects the usual reductionistic accounts of knowing as simply inadequate, and considers critical realism the way forward:

Critical Realism (CR) is, in my view, the most promising general approach to social science for best framing our research and theory. CR, as a philosophy of (social) science (not a sociological theory per se), offers the best alternative to the problems and limits presented by positivist empiricism, hermeneutical interpretivism, strong social constructionism, and postmodernist deconstruction. It is the meta-theoretical direction in which American sociology needs to move.⁴

Second, Smith's argument is genuinely *methodical*, in Lonergan's understanding of that term, and he reverses counterpositions while developing positions. For instance, *What Is a Person?* has little patience for positivism and its obvious failure to grasp that the real does not boil down to what one can take a good look at, just as knowing is not taking a good look. Smith rejects the "epistemic fallacy" (Lonergan's "cognitional myth") of identifying the real with the empirical: "objective reality is by nature not *flat* but *stratified*, existing on multiple, though connected, levels. . . . We live in a multilayered reality . . . and our framework for understanding reality must be attuned to that fact. . . ."⁵ Keeping with this, Smith argues for the intelligibility of causality and the real contributions

³Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 11.

⁴"How to Learn Critical Realism," Christian Smith's webpage, accessed September 3, 2015, <https://www3.nd.edu/~csmith22/criticalrealism.htm>.

⁵Smith, *What Is a Person?*, 95.