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John Levi Martin

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FEATURED REVIEW ESSAY

Personal Best

JOHN LEVI MARTIN
University of Chicago
jlmartin@uchicago.edu

Objectives

In this ambitious book, Christian Smith begins with a number of critiques of conventional social science (hence CSS), by which he means variables-oriented sociology. This has produced a shadow world in which variables, and not persons, are the real agents (pp. 1–5, 104, 285), while all that we hold important when we think about ourselves in lived experience is ignored if not contradicted. This undermines any connection between our science and our ethics, and perhaps our ethics altogether.

Smith argues that we must re-orient our theories to turn on *persons*. A person, in this understanding, is an integrated, self-aware center of subjectivity and physical action capable of moral responsibility and of being an Aristotelian efficient cause (pp. 48, 98ff). Should it be possible, a personalist social science would allow our ethical and our scientific claims to truly exist in the same intellectual sphere, and would take a novel approach to explanation.

Smith believes that this reorientation will be aided by an adherence to the principles of “critical realism” (CR). I will argue that Smith’s version of realism, while supporting his personalism in places, ends up undermining this project. This does not mean that personalism as Smith offers it is not possible, but it does suggest that more work remains to be done.

What Is Realism?

By “realism” one may mean a mere belief in reality, and Smith often makes it appear as if this were a major contribution of his approach. But it usually enters in debates over a theory of knowledge. Realism says

What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up, by **Christian Smith**. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 518pp. \$25.00 paper. ISBN: 9780226765945.

not only that there is a real world but that our knowledge is knowledge of this world, and not of a mediating world constructed by our own subjective apparatuses. This is a very attractive epistemology, for things that seem problematic to a non-realist become non-problematic. Most practicing scientists are realists, for realism usually works in practice. The problem is that (as we say at Chicago), it doesn’t work very well in theory. Whether that is a problem for Smith however, remains to be seen.

Realism may also be contrasted to nominalism as a way of understanding our general terms. A nominalist holds that our definitions create the generalities we manipulate mentally, while a realist maintains that the generalities exist “in the real” and therefore our definitions do not have to establish rigid boundaries. Smith’s realism does aid him here, for example, by serving as a basis to attack what he (like others) calls strong “social constructionism” (SC), which he interprets as a set of claims that there is no clear reality outside of what we say about the world. Such theories, Smith argues, make it seem that the way things are comes not from reality but from arbitrary categories of language (p. 155).

Further, realism (as opposed to nominalism) allows Smith to concentrate on *describing* personhood without *defining* it, which puts

him in a far better position to consider the ethical nature of persons than nominalists. Were a person defined as the conjunction of a set of characteristics, then a human lacking one due to impairment would by implication lose their right to personhood and be ripe for the culling. By describing normal personhood, Smith no more denies those with impairments their personhood than a realist has to deny that a horse with a missing leg is still a horse (p. 45, n. 30).

Finally, in terms of a theory of knowledge, Smith emphasizes that CR turns on a notion of emergence. In contrast to the dismissively reductive analyses that Smith wonderfully calls "nothing buttery" (p. 38), CR proposes that there are higher levels that emerge from lower ones. Here Smith's notion is a conventional one; all emergence arises from parts coming together, although he is forced to think differently when it comes to persons. Smith sees personhood as an emergent form of a particular type, which he calls *proactive* emergence. Here "The agency behind the emergence adheres in the emergent entity" [for example, an animal], in contrast to *responsive* emergence [when something else produces the emergence] (p. 86f).¹ If such emergent personalism can be demonstrated to be real, Smith thinks, we will have no recourse but to build our social science around it, so long as we accept CR.

¹ One might note that this example demonstrates a problem in Smith's (p. 33) general assumption that emergent entities are "made up of" parts: Colonel Sanders may divide a chicken into eight parts for purposes of frying, but chickens are not "made up of" these parts at all. Smith (p. 255) writes that Harrison White (with a PhD in physics) "has gotten particulars about the crucial issue of emergence wrong" because he failed to accept that "emergence always transpires through the interactions of real low-level entities pre-existently possessing their own properties and causal capacities"..."emergence does not create the parts that give rise to emergence...but depends upon them" (p. 256). Smith's own view of persons seems at odds with this.

The Middle Way

Smith does not give a very detailed exposition of his CR: we know that it holds "that humans can acquire a truthful, though fallible knowledge and understanding of reality through various forms of disciplined conceptualization" (p. 92). As this might not clearly differentiate CR from other theories of science, Smith focuses on how other approaches are flawed, which does not always clarify his own arguments.

Smith tends to set up CR as coming in between other extreme positions; on the left lie "constructivism, postmodernism, and certain versions of the hermeneutical perspective," while on the right we find "the positivist empiricist paradigm" (p. 92). Given that he opposes his approach to the extremes, he is at his most successful when dealing with extremists, and indeed, he never explicitly engages anyone else. He not only rebuts but diagnoses the work of Stephan Fuchs (motivated by anxiety and an inferiority complex for the scientific status of sociology; pp. 261, 264), and when it comes to Donald Black, he suggests taxpayer revolt (p. 266).²

But these are exceptions; in general, like communism to Curtis LeMay, Smith considers positivism and postmodernism best handled from an altitude of 30,000 feet. They appear more as moods or styles than as actual arguments; the one pompously over-confident (p. 304) and the other histrionic and babbling.

It may well be that there was a great deal of babbling, but Smith's assertions that, for instance, we have "the natural capacity to understand the real properties of quantity, quality, time, and space" (p. 44) do not end the matter. His arguments go down familiar paths that have familiar twists for those who go down far enough. Smith (with a confidence most positivists would envy), seems to stop before the going gets rough. Most of us do think the world is pretty much what it seems to be, that things look pretty much the same

² Although the piece discussed by Smith can charitably only be described as "mad," I think the good citizens of Virginia got their money from Black; I have it on good authority that he was the only professor for whom the students applauded as he *came into class*.

to all people, and that we are not really dreaming when we think we are awake, at least not *now*. The reason that we have various "extreme" epistemic philosophies is that it turns out, sadly, that this belief is not one that can be rigorously demonstrated, and at a number of interesting points it turns out to be false. That does not mean that it is not a good idea to hold it, just as we can treat the earth as flat for computations involving close distances. But we are unlikely to be able to determine how to proceed merely by choosing proponents of different approaches who are as far apart as possible, and then compromising in terms of the most epiphenomenal aspects of philosophical claims (such as their style). Goldilocks might prefer lukewarm oatmeal that is "just right," and sometimes find it, but should not extrapolate a conviction that the world would always provide it.³

Because the existence of reality is not likely to be contentious, and Smith (p. 410) like others accepts that "in our perceptual and cognitive fallibility we often do not know and understand what is really true about reality," the pertinent question is whether CR gives us a different criterion of truth than CSS. Smith advocates an "altheaic" theory which, he says, "avoids embracing a simple correspondence theory of truth" in favor of a more "sophisticated" version of correspondence. It is this: "A propositional statement is true if and only if what the statement says to be the case actually is the case" (p. 209). One would wonder if it were really this simple, how the debate could have raged for so long. (Smith's [p. 210]

response to critiques is a re-statement of his conviction.)

Smith's idea of truth thus hinges on the nature of the real—but this itself is somewhat obscure. He distinguishes between the *real*, "what exists"; the *actual*, "what happens as events in the world"; and the *empirical*, what we experience (p. 93). "Reality can be nonmaterial" (p. 96): examples here include "reasons, intentions and values" and "certain social facts" and "normative facts" such as "that it is better to know and believe what is true rather than what is false..." (p. 14) as well as "the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology" (p. 169). Smith refrains from clarifying these issues, wanting to avoid the "error" of focusing on epistemology instead of ontology, which strikes me as akin to criticizing parents for the error of teaching their children to walk as opposed to run. It seems hard to say what the world is like if we are not sure if our knowledge of the world is valid.

Smith has excellent critiques of some of the errors that a collapse of epistemology and ontology produces (pp. 146, 152), but it seems that he runs into similar difficulties. Usually we use the term "real" to describe things and their existence, and the term "true" to describe statements about existing things. I do honestly believe the planet Mercury is real, but it is not true. In his haste not to be seduced into epistemology, Smith often transfers truth to reality (p. 130f), thus generating precisely that sort of skeptical SC that Smith abhors. It might at first blush sound silly to say "the past is a social construct," but Smith's response is to declare that the past is real (p. 134). Where is it? I believe that the coronation of Mary I in 1553 *was* real, but also that this coronation does not now "exist." To say that the past *is* real is to make my belief reality.⁴

Be that as it may, it is quite reasonable to hold that even if realism cannot be well established, we are just going to start with it. For

³ Regarding this reassuring side to CR, Smith notes that a good part of American sociology is "whether its authors know it or not, tacitly and de facto critical realist in approach" (p. 491). And this seems to be because what he considers CR's prescriptive methodology, which he (p. 97) calls "retroduction" (determining what the world must be like for us to see what we do see) is in fact the core of CSS (you were probably subjected to a lecture in this when you learned maximum likelihood methods). This CR would provide a wonderful all-purpose justification for current practices—as long as everyone is allowed to declare what is real.

⁴ Smith does not mean to equate knowledge and reality; we know that because he thinks that different species of animals have different "partial" knowledges, "Yet this does not mean that different knowers exist in distinct realities" (p. 180). Smith's logic seems to suggest the opposite.

some things, however, it becomes a problem—like those that are not in our direct experience (quarks, or social structures). Here is where the hard work comes for realists. Although he does not claim this as definitional, Smith does argue that things that are real usually have causal effects (pp. 14, 190). (The qualification comes because Smith wants to reserve the possibility of promoting numbers to the status of real.) This seems to put a heavy burden on causality to tell us what is real. What does Smith tell us about causality? Not surprisingly, "Causation is real" (p. 96). More important, causation means not laws of constant conjunction (p. 292), or even necessarily any actual events, but a *potential* that entities have. In some ways, then, causation is a mark of the real because anything real has characteristics that can matter for something, some time.

This seems quite defensible and indeed important: causation seems to be about "mattering," and if something matters, it has to be real, even if it is not matter. But this may not help us determine *what* is real, if we allow (as Smith does) emergent causation. We accept that something emergent led real wages to decline over the past 30 years. But what was this? The economy? Capitalism? The market? Globalization? Whatever it was, was real, but will the real emergent entity please stand up?

Now in some sense, Smith's analysis of emergence betrays the same collapse of truth and reality that we saw above. "We live in a multilayered reality, it turns out, and our framework for understanding reality must be attuned to this fact" (pp. 34f, 95). It is because there are different levels that we have "the different scientific disciplines of physics, chemistry, biology, meteorology, physiology, psychology, sociology, astronomy, and so on" (p. 35). But usually when we use the word "levels" here, it is short for "levels of analysis." It may well be that there are good reasons why we have meteorology and physics as separate disciplines, but that does not establish that there is a parallel construction in the world. It is because our framework for understanding the world shears into different levels that Smith is sure that we live in a multilayered reality.

It seems to me that one does not need to claim that reality "is" layered in order to

make Smith's most important point: there is no reason we cannot say that (for example) molecules are real, even if the molecule contains no other "stuff" than the atoms. This is because the qualities of the molecule can matter for something. It may be irrelevant whether we decide to consider molecules to be real or mere fictions of convenience—but not when it comes to persons.

Overall, the realism has not done heavy epistemic work. Rather than shedding clarifying light where we have a confusion, "reality-talk" here enters in the form of a number of *ex cathedra* statements about the way the world and science are, "in fact" (p. 11). Whenever there is a claim that Smith would like to make, but that cannot be established either analytically or synthetically, it is imported into the realm of reality, dropped there, and then discovered as an "in fact." When it comes to how we should actually do our science, Smith's prescriptions are precise where they could well be vague (e.g., choice of statistical technique), but vague where they should be precise (I recognize that the same charge may be held against my own *The Explanation of Social Action!*).⁵

He urges the centrality of causal mechanisms (popular these days and claimed as derivable from widely opposed theoretical traditions), but this does not seem integrated with personalism (p. 293). His example of such a causal mechanism—coming on the heels of a warning to remember "the fact that variables are not causal actors" (p. 289)—is "the process by which homophily tends to generate segmented groups with internal homogeneity" (p. 297). This sounds an awful lot like a variables-based explanation, and indeed, when Smith lists causal mechanisms that he would find acceptable

⁵ CR tells us that some accounts of reality are better than others, "as judged by reasonable criteria" (p. 144), but when Smith gives a concrete example of how CR would deal with a real issue (debates over the nature of religious change), he believes it requires no less than "identifying and becoming highly familiar with the inherent and interactive operations and tendencies of all of the important causal mechanisms existing in modern social structures and practice that influence the strength and character of religion" (p. 301f)—that is, CR tells us to be perfect.

in explaining religious change, they all involve independent variables: the actor is always religious pluralism (p. 302). Smith's ideas as to how we choose a good explanation (p. 213f) are reasonable, but do not seem to require CR.

Personhood

And CR's seeming attractions as a way to defend personhood turn out to be deceptive. Smith's ideas about what is inherent to a person really do have implications for what a full life would be and indeed, about the nature of the good—for the good is about "realizing the nature of what we as living beings are" (pp. 405, 412).

But what are we? We cannot simply look around or within, for we are in a condition of "brokenness," "including endemic misunderstanding, hostility, hatred, estrangement, deceit, alienation, violence, and murder" (p. 77). The same problem that Durkheim confronted in trying to develop a scientific ethics arises here—how do we decide what in reality is the true essence, and what is a pernicious accident? Despite the desire not to disconnect the *is* from the *ought*, Smith must acknowledge that there is a "distance standing between that potential good *ought* and the actual less-than-fully-good *is*" (p. 415). If the *ought* does not come simply from the *is*, from where do we get it? Smith seems to want a theory of good and bad based on the nature of the world, but as far as I can see, he has a world constructed on the basis of a theory whose notions of good and bad simply come from his own declarations.

Smith considers this objection (p. 422f)—that he is merely digging up what he has purposefully buried and announcing it as a discovery—and responds that "of course I am drawing out moral conclusions from the descriptive account of persons that I have advanced. That is precisely my intent and procedure." But our worry is about the other part—that what Smith says is essential to a person is not in fact universally essential. The further Smith (p. 436) elaborates his understanding of what is essential to the human person, the more familiar it becomes, and we wonder whether this book answers the questions: "What is

a Person?" or "What is a liberal educated North American in 2010?" or "Who is Christian Smith?"⁶

Why Are Persons So Good to Each Other?

An important lacuna comes when Smith tries to deduce universal benevolence as the good. By his definition of the person, he is indeed able to derive that we cannot flourish ourselves without advancing the flourishing of others, and he compares this to a "team sport" (p. 406). But he does not follow the metaphor to allow that some teams could win at the expense of others, and he declares that this is impossible "by virtue of the nature of reality" (p. 423f).

This blunt denial of a logical possibility (that some groups thrive by squashing others) is unnecessary, for Smith produces a more sophisticated argument. This one turns on dignity, which he considers to be "an emergent and ineliminable property of personhood," independent of any other characteristics other than personhood (p. 453f).⁷ Unfortunately, to make this (I think) important argument about the dignity of all, Smith has to contradict his previous claims about emergence (akin to claiming that water can emerge even if you don't have the oxygen or the hydrogen; which is, as Smith says, "a mystery, admittedly"; pp. 435, 454, 457f).⁸ His much better—albeit briefer—argument is that the nature of human personhood is that we ourselves lose dignity when we treat others without dignity (p. 463). If we accept this, we can dispense with emergence and realism entirely, as

⁶ To those who might worry about the potential authoritarianism of an insistence that *is-ness* supports only one ethics, Smith points out that CR admits to its fallibility, which seems hardly comforting.

⁷ The reason to make it independent of capacities is so that we do not find that persons with diminished capacities lose their claim to dignity (pp. 448, 451).

⁸ Smith claims that human dignity is a "brute fact" but supports this by evidence that people's social organization treats it as if it were there (p. 482), which sounds just like the sort of thing that would establish a *conventional* fact.

dignity is an attribution and not a property, but a dignifying attribution.

But Smith does not take this route, I think because it comes too close to Kantianism—an ethic that is derived solely from ethics, and not from reality, and one that is absolute (always treat all others with dignity). Just as Smith wants to “clean up the middle” for science (p. 20), he wants a similarly situated ethics. “Prudent and just persons will in general accept and work with their personal finitude and limitations—mental, emotional, bodily, financial, and so on—as they go about seeking the good of others, and so not try to be or do more than reality allows, which is not good for anyone” (p. 409). It is easy to poke fun at such compromises (“Pledge as much as you reasonably can”), but grand ethics that look good on paper and are followed by no one are hardly a contribution. To ground personhood in an absolute ethics might condemn it to irrelevance; hence Smith's choice. But grounding it “in the real” brings its own problems.

And one unresolved problem seems to be the nature of explanation. Smith insists that the ultimate criterion of a good one must be “personal human judgment and intellectual satisfaction” (p. 368, n. 40; cf. p. 312). Now personal knowledge can mean two things. It can mean the knowledge that is appropriate to the world of persons; or, it can mean what I happen to believe based on my own life. To say that “Theories and terms that falsify our lived experience and are impossible to live with ought finally to have no epistemological authority for or trump what by our best accounts seems real to us” (p. 108) can mean either that our terms need phenomenological validity for the human community to which they are relevant, or that I get to disbelieve what I do not want to believe. At a number of points, Smith seems to be leaning towards the second of these. Although Smith notes that what counts as our personal knowledge can be extended through research, he does not make such extension necessary in order for us to declare that if an idea is “insightful” and helps us “make

sense” of our lives, it is “true” (and therefore presumably “real”) (pp. 294, 297, 106ff).

This is quite at odds with Smith's understanding of CR, in which there is only one reality, and our ideas are true if they correspond to this reality. Strangely enough, Smith's approach logically leads to the solipsism he suspects follows SC. Or else only one person's reality is real—Smith's.

Conclusion

This is indeed an interesting and bold work, but it seems that it is really asking for far too much. Smith wants to be able to figure out what is essential to a human being, *and* come up with a detailed ethics (not too different from the one he already has), *and* develop an epistemology that will show that the sort of research he likes to do is in fact productive of true statements. The only way that Smith can make all this happen is to import into the nature of things precisely what would justify his conclusions. For a work of theory, there is not a great deal of analysis here, and I think this is because Smith's understanding of CR allows him to substitute claims that something is real for a more difficult path of the manipulation of ideas. CR in this form is addictive; the more one uses it, the more one needs it.

But what Smith is reaching toward remains important and his core insights are persuasive. Smith's realism seems to turn on the idea that some things *matter*, and that we need to start here, and not employ sophisticated techniques that might seem to dissolve them. Smith's personalism seems to turn on the idea that a science of humans that ignores their personhood falls far short of what we, as actors, might want. And it should matter for our theory that we are persons, for persons matter for other things *as persons*. Now his project might prove impossible—perhaps de-personalization is intrinsic to our idea of social science. If it is possible, it seems that it will need a different analytic vocabulary, perhaps one that does not come from theories of stuff-science at all.

Fellow Traveler in Theoretical Frontiers

CHRISTIAN SMITH
University of Notre Dame
chris.smith@nd.edu

Who in sociology is interested in genuine disciplinary soul searching and open to transformations of our scholarly assumptions and practices for the better? This is a book for them, though it should be a book for most sociologists. John Levi Martin's *The Explanation of Social Action* is an important, learned, and engaging work, as many book reviews say about their subjects. But it is more than that. It is a threat to the established rules of the game played on the field of social science, and one that is much needed. This book provides a smart critique of mainstream social science and a promising vision of improved alternative approaches.

I did not expect to have such a positive reaction to this book, partly because I got absolutely nothing out of reading Martin's other recent book, *Social Structures* (2011). So I was pleasantly surprised when won over by the reading here. To be sure, this book is not the salvation of social science, nor absolutely original in its arguments. It does have its stronger and weaker points. But the central thrust of its message and many of the particulars of specific arguments are right on. I only regret that what we know about habitus and capital in professional career-building will mean it will be more ignored and dismissed than deserved. But let me see what I can do to help prevent that.

The Venerable Editor has instructed us not to pull our punches in this mutual-book-review event. For all I know, Martin in his review is going to try to knock my theoretical lights out (we are quarantined from each other while working on our reviews, like subjects in a prisoner's-dilemma game). But for my part, I simply have no punches to pull.

I cannot here do justice to the complexity of Martin's argument, but can only offer this brief summary. Martin begins by noting the deep commitment in social science to providing causal explanations of action from the third-person perspective—that is, not taking seriously first-person accounts of what is

The Explanation of Social Action, by **John Levi Martin**. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011. 396pp. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780199773312.

going on and why offered by the actors themselves who are involved in any given event, action, or situation. There are some good reasons for moving beyond first-person perspectives, of course, but interrogating our approach also uncovers some major problems. First, it reveals a profound and categorical—rather than a measured and judicious—distrust of human persons as social actors equipped to know anything about themselves and their environments. Second, it uncovers some things fatally wrong about our standard notions of causality. Martin spends two chapters unpacking these problems. The results reveal, on the one hand, an impossible tendency in social science to view our explanatory knowledge as a kind of enlightened *gnosis* that miraculously transcends the normal human epistemic condition in a way that strips “ordinary” humanity of its personhood and places social scientists in an authoritarian position of epistemic command and control. On the other hand, Martin's case effectively shows that all of this is based on a philosophy of causation that is impossible to defend rationally (forcing us instead to resort to smoke-and-mirrors, disciplinary inertia, and institutional-turf defense-work to keep it going).

Martin then shows in two chapters how this imperious, person-dismissing approach is rooted in a “Freudo-Durkheimian” posture that perpetuates deeply problematic nineteenth-century intellectual concerns, aspects of which he rightly notes as “monstrously totalitarian” (p. 323). In a final chapter, Martin lays out a clear and compelling account of what, in contrast to our present standards, counts as good social-science

explanation. I intend to require my graduate students to re-read that chapter once a day for two years.

Along the way, Martin spends three chapters proposing his own constructive theoretical alternative to un-self-reflective neo-positivism, hypothetico-deductivism, counterfactual theories of causation, obsession with variance *within* entities, impersonal causality, and general linear reality, among other widespread problems. The first chapter describes what he calls a "social aesthetics"—by which he means "a study of the processes whereby actors take in the qualities of the social world around them" (p. 239). Unfortunately, that label will likely be misleading and off-putting for those who do not read closely. The other two chapters sort out questions of habits, motivations, and action vis-à-vis the larger "field theory" that Martin advocates (more than a little there is a developed version of his 2003 *AJS* article on the same). The short story here is that relations and positions between agents often matter more than measured variable features of agents. Indeed.

In and through his argument, Martin forces us to confront numerous important questions. Does social science really believe in the existence of "social laws" or not? If so, then what actually have we discovered of them after a century of research? If not, then why do we continue to design and run our analyses as if we still believed in them? Do we really not believe that the real world itself in all of its particularity entails enough patterned regularity that we have to invent theoretical abstractions to construct our own regularity and impose on it our own untethered-to-reality cultural constructions? Why is it that the standard approach to social science has set up a terminal "agency-versus-structure" problem that nobody can solve? Why is it that normal-science social science sets up human freedom and social determination as a zero-sum trade-off, so that the more we succeed professionally the less free we apparently are? Why do sociologists continually confuse being empirical as a necessary methodological orientation with a faith commitment in empiricism as a philosophical dogma? Why do we think what we are doing is all about what is "observable," when always in social science, in fact, "the

senses are used to uncover information that is not, strictly speaking, apparent to the senses" (p. 232)? Why do so many of our explanations confuse causes with mere social conditions?

Why does social science think it is justified relying on a neo-positivist, hypothetico-deductive model of science when its "epistemology is a liability—it actually interferes with our ability to carry out the most basic tasks in any empirical endeavor, namely, determining what is real and what is not" (p. 110)? Do we actually realize the perverse extent to which our "science [is one] in which statements are made about the connection of imaginary elements in an imaginary world, and our justification is the hope that these will explain no case but rather an unknown portion of every case" (p. 321)? Are we aware of how darn many of our problems go back to unresolved theoretical difficulties in Immanuel Kant? If not, why not, since it should be our business to know what our problems are? Why do we have such difficulty acknowledging and appreciating the key role of personal *insight* and judgment in good social science analysis, simply because they cannot be formulated into deontological rules promulgatable in a first-semester graduate-methods seminar? Why do the products of our statistical analyses seem so incommensurate with our own phenomenological experience as human persons ("the past 100 years of statistics has built on [a Platonic 'average man'] attempt to take the individuality out of people and treat them as replicable units without motivation, and then to fix the problems that necessarily arise from this attempt" (p. 322)? And is the intellectually relativistic live-and-let-live posture of our intra-disciplinary mutual ignoring of rivals and incompatible truth-claims that characterizes the "*Pax Wisconsinana*" (p. 4) of post-Mertonian sociology really good for us?

Some may be tempted to dismiss these as tired or foolish questions, shot off half-cocked by some young(ish) whippersnapper. Not so. These are excellent questions—at least as posed and developed in the book—the answering of which requires an honest reckoning that can only do us disciplinary good.

The Explanation of Social Action can rightly be read as a general, critical-and-constructive essay on (bad and) good explanation in social

science, within which Martin has also placed his own proposal for a particular kind of alternative analysis (social aesthetics, field theory)—and so it is possible to be miserably provoked or enthusiastically sold on the first, general argument, while perhaps being merely open to and interested in but not necessarily committed to his specific argument about aesthetics and field theory. Readers who already think Martin's field theory is uninteresting, therefore, ought to read this book anyway, for the value of its general argument about explanation.

That said, reading this book will likely be rough sledding for many sociologists who, to put it charitably, are not renowned for any interest in or familiarity with philosophy (however relevant it is for our work) or patient in learning the history behind our present-day (problematic) practices and their (adverse) consequences. But grasping Martin's argument—and the promise it holds for a better social science—depends upon digging into both.

One feature of Martin's writing worth noting is his seemingly flippant categorical zingers, which may turn some readers off (my favorite: "In short, we have asked stupid questions and then declared actors stupid on the basis of their answers") juxtaposed with the real care he takes in self-reflexively criticizing and qualifying his own arguments (e.g., "not all social action takes place in fields," "[my view] has inherent limitations," etc.). The zingers pertain to his targets of criticisms (most of which are justified), while the qualifications and limitations are consistently applied to his own constructive theoretical proposals. Few sociologists I have read are as diligent as Martin to acknowledge the limits, uncertainties, and scope conditions involved in their own favorite ideas.

Also worth noting is Martin's particular style of reasoning and exposition, which reflects his larger approach to creative inquiry. Echoing a Thurberism ("It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers"), two passages near the end of the book are illuminating: "[With the] vocabulary that we have developed so far, we have solved no problems nor gained deep insight. But this was not our goal, and properly so—all we have looked for is a noncontradictory vocabulary that allows us to frame

questions that pertain to the real world.... We should beware of the theorists' penchant to ask only the questions for which he has an excellent answer. No advance will be made that way. The key is to identify extremely hard problems and then perhaps to attack them in unusually clear and simple conditions" (pp. 266–67). Secondly: "We should be quite self-conscious when we are tempted to criticize an argument that sounds reasonable [simply] because it does not contain a prefabricated answer to every problem. One way in which a lunatic can be recognized is that he has an answer for everything and is convinced that everything fits into a system" (p. 350). Martin at times seems to play on the lunatic edge himself. Yet he does not pretend to have all the answers. He is much clearer on what our current problems are than how to resolve them all, and he knows that. But the imbalance between his strength of criticism and adequacy of constructive response, I agree, does not justify sweeping the problems criticized under a disciplinary rug. We have real issues and problems that need confronting, however uncomfortable that may be.

Among Martin's criticisms, readers must not miss the implications of his pragmatist discussion of Durkheim (Chapter Four) for his evisceration of any thoroughgoing social constructionism. "It is not that all cultures carve up the world differently and are unable to perceive sameness without words," he shows, "but that we make large-scale combinations of nonproblematic things differently depending on what we are doing" (p. 138). Therefore, he presses, "any order in our analyses must come from actual regularities in the dispersion of things and thoughts across persons [in reality], and not because we have scribbled over the glasses with which we see the social world" (p. 350). Right on.

But I believe that I am supposed to actually criticize Martin's book, to spill at least a little blood for the audience's enjoyment. Let me see what I can do. In fact, my view is that Martin and I are both heading in similar directions, operating with comparable concerns and criticisms, and correspondingly groping toward a genuinely alternative approach to sociology. Still, the particular paths on which we are moving in parallel are different. Martin is influenced by Ernst Cassirer, John Dewey, Pierre Bourdieu, Kurt

Lewin, among others, while I have been shaped by Roy Bhaskar, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Margaret Archer, Andrew Sayer, and a variety of personalists. Martin is a Gestaltly-pragmatist field theorist, while I am trying to work out a critical realist personalism. Critical realism is not hostile to, and in fact on key points agrees with pragmatism, but to be sure, also does have some basic reservations about pragmatism. At bottom however, most of the differences between us—as least as seen in these two books—are not profound, but provide grounds for some stimulating and productive discussions to (I hope) come.

But let me try a bit harder to criticize. I would very much like to hear Martin spell out the details of the view of human persons that he believes his own account requires. He makes statements suggesting that this kind of development is necessary. And I think what he will have to say will need to be thick and rich. Yet he leaves it rather thin in this book, suggesting only rudimentary statements about “actors being oriented to each other,” and so on. Martin seems more wedded to parsimony in principle than I am, but I think we all would benefit by his developing a more complete description of the kind of entities that people *are*. Martin's discussions of “emergence” (e.g., p. 160, p. 223)—a concept that figures centrally in critical realism—suggest to me that he does not fully grasp what emergence is about and the important explanatory work it does. I also think there is a good version of explanatory *casual* analysis that relies on identifying real casual *mechanisms* at work (though not exactly as Hedström, Swedberg, Tilly, or Bearman describe it), about which Martin seems more skeptical than necessary. I wondered why Martin's discussion of “social aesthetics” (especially p. 189) did not recognize or engage Alfred Schutz's phenomenological theory, which seems relevant (even though I think the latter is fraught with problems and has been used by many to ill effect). I wondered too what Martin makes of Thomas Reid's Scottish enlightenment common-sense epistemology, which later influenced the American pragmatist Charles Peirce's “critical common-sensism.”

Let me see, what else? Martin seems unaware of a significant, relevant debate

about motivations and accounts that took place in the *British Journal of Sociology* in 1983, involving arguments by Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce that resonate well with his case. While Martin and I agree on the central importance of motivations in generating and explaining people's actions, I am not sure that we share the same account of the *ontology* of motivations (e.g., p. 265)—his view seems a bit flabby, if I understand it aright. Finally, Martin often writes categorically about an inclusive “we” in social science, when in fact I think more accurately he should say “mainstream, normal-science” social science. In his attempt to show the common problems underlying much if not most of social science, I fear he may fail to acknowledge some of the real diversity there. I am sure that various micro-sociologists will object that they have already understood and responded to most of the problems he raises—which may be partly true, though some of them may not fully grasp the extent to which even they are captive to certain of the larger problems that Martin critiques. If nothing else, Martin may create some unnecessary resistance to his own arguments by sometimes painting too vigorously with too broad a brush.

Other than that, all I can say is that Martin should simply go ahead and declare himself a card-carrying critical realist, since critical realism is the meta-theory that makes best sense of his theoretical and analytical instincts and ideas, at least as expressed in this book, and it does nothing to contradict his social aesthetics or field theory, as I understand them. (Critical realism is a meta-theory, not a theory per se, and so accommodates and supports many good theories, including, potentially, field theory—it gives us a frame to help understand how to improve our theories and explanations genuinely.) It is only a matter of time before critical realism displaces a degenerating positivism as the center of gravity in social science, and Martin might as well help speed up the revolution. He is already most of the way to actually being a critical realist now, by the sounds of his assumptions and arguments. I understand that he is, according to Wikipedia, “an intellectual nomad in the vast universe of sociological inquiry.” But if he could nonetheless see his way to embracing one coherent

philosophical meta-theory, the one that in fact best frames and explains the logic behind his best thinking (and all good social science thinking, in fact), Martin could make a lot more headway than trying to work with no organizing, coherent, guiding meta-theory. Within critical realism there is plenty of space and freedom for the scholarly nomad to roam. It simply helps make better sense of what ones sees while wandering, and what to do with it, so that it all adds up to something coherent and meaningful as social science.

I take it to be a good sign when I not only agree with a book, and enjoy it, but also

genuinely *learn* interesting and important things from it. That was true of *The Explanation of Social Action* for me. I strongly commend it, not as a 15-minute-skim book, or even a two-hour read/skim book, but as a seriously-read-and-maybe-read-twice-to-soak-it-all-up book.

References

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John Levi Martin's Response to Christian Smith

Christian Smith's review is kind not so much because it is positive but because it notes the weaknesses in *The Explanation of Social Action* (ESA) but spends more time on the strengths; unfortunately, as a result, he had less space than I to devote to what seems to be the key issue between us: the potential of critical realism (CR) to aid us in developing a social science that has room for true persons.⁹ Here I indicate why I still think ESA is incompatible with CR.

Smith wonders about what I make of the Scottish common-sense realist tradition. This was in some sense my first epistemic enthusiasm—studying 1920s Presbyterianism in college, I was impressed by the way Biblical literalism had been wed to common sense realism, in part because of its

democratic-populist (though also patriarchal-localist) implications. But having (then) some familiarity with modern science, the limits of this as a general principle were obvious to me. It was only when examinations of the field theoretic tradition brought me to the Gestalt school that I regained an interest in what Malinowski called "naïve realism." ESA began as a defense of these principles, not only for sociologists, but for everyday actors.

I was forced to reconsider this position because many implications were implausible and unsavory—most notably, if social perception is treated as naively real, in that our qualitative perceptions of other persons are true because we perceive the real world, then there is no reason why we cannot say that "gypsies are untrustworthy." Inserting a line-item veto over the perceptions of those we do not like is hardly an improvement—it would merely lose the democratic features of realism without any increased clarity. Of course, many true things are implausible and unsavory, and I was unwilling to abandon a parsimonious account without a better one. But an examination of pragmatism suggested that there is a consistent approach that avoids a forced choice between naïve realism and the sort of up-for-grabs social constructionism that Smith skewers.

⁹ For the record, the greatest weaknesses stem from the obscurity of the fundamental social psychology necessary for actors to perceive relations in objects. Although it seems that they *must* do so, our sciences do not yet understand *how* they do so. Speaking of "our," Smith is also right that I homogenize sociology when speaking critically. This is not only because I orient my discussion (as does he) to the mainstream, but because I have always liked the Jewish form of confession in which we collectively announce our sins in the first person plural.

Smith notes C.S. Peirce's connection to common-sensist Reid, and that Peirce spoke of his own approach as "critical common sensism." However, although Peirce was a "realist" as opposed to a nominalist when it came to our understanding of generalities, in a number of places, he noted that the only consistent epistemology was idealism, and hence considered his own approach objective idealism. (Thus we directly perceive matter because matter itself is merely "effete mind.") For one of the things all the pragmatists could agree on was the futility of positing a "real" noumenal world *behind* the experienced world. Such positing tends to lead to what Adorno called "peephole" epistemologies, while pragmatism (like phenomenology in both its empirical/Gestalt and its non-empirical/Husserlian modes) is an "in-the-world" epistemology. Peephole epistemologies have much to recommend them; they can be used to remind us that certain scientific constructs are not the be-all-and-end-all of the world, that reality overpours the concept, and that we often see through a glass, darkly. But transferred to the social realm, they easily become trivial, suicidal, or authoritarian, in that they are only stable if we can agree that some people are looking through the *right* peephole while others actually have their heads oriented to (if not up) the wrong hole altogether.

Now CR is intended to avoid the peephole aspect, but the "C" is necessary because we cannot simply "see" leptons, imaginary numbers, or the nature of the person. In these cases, Smith's retroduction is operationally nearly equivalent to the hypothetico-deductivism of the dominant approach—not being "in" the real world, but making inferences about the real based on the nature of our experience.

It may seem to be splitting hairs, but it makes quite a difference whether we start with such a hypothesized reality or, like the pragmatists, begin with experience. The latter is directly empirical to persons, and the former is not. As James says, from the fundamental fact of experience we bifurcate self and world. This is literally true—in some cases, touching something tells us about the *world*: "here is a leaf." But if the sensation is associated with severe damage, we do not sense the world, but ourselves—"I

have cut my hand" and not "here is a jagged metal blade." As the sensation changes, the *location* of the experience shifts from outer to inner. We can be defensibly convinced of the veridicality of some experience, but this does not justify our placing it out there, "in the real," especially if it is just one person's experience. As James continued, the thing about our own thoughts is that they are only effective on our selves: our thought of fire burns no one. Only if it burns others can we call it real (note the similarity to Smith's argument that if something is real, it must be able to matter for something).

Common sense is that experience that we all sense together. What only you sense is a dream or madness; what some sense but not others is culture; what was sensed and is no longer is part of the story of scientific progress. Peirce's critical common-sensism returns knowledge to a concrete human community in engagement with its environs. For pragmatism, reality is more or less the outcome of human agreement—not because whatever foolishness we all believe cannot be distinguished from truth (though it may well be so), but because humans are constitutionally able to orient to the world, and where things become difficult, they can use science, use critique, use intelligence, use intervention, and use cooperation to improve their grasp. And if they do not, no epistemology will help them.

Smith's CR is stable as a credo, but will only lead to consensus if we have an enlightened despot to choose which peephole orients us to the real (for Smith, no mechanically objective standards can be allowed to choose whose reality is real). This avoids the mob democracy that results when social cognition happens without intelligence, but we may have underestimated the intelligence that comes with the manyness of the social world. As Peirce says somewhere, philosophers are strangely over-confident of their own beliefs—each of a hundred may have a particular conviction and remain completely unshaken by the disagreement of the other 99.

It does not matter what I think a person is; I am probably no better than the other 99 who live in the same world but may have different ideas. What does matter is whether we can find a stable vocabulary to describe the

dispersion of subjectivity across all one-hundred, one that could be successfully used by any and all, and that can shed light on the non-randomness therein. ESA is an attempt in this direction using Gestalt-inspired theories. These say that we best know where we are by looking at our relation

to other things; we best know what others are by looking at how they respond to objects. Thus the form of a thin theoretical vocabulary does not prevent us from a rich understanding, once it is coupled with the complex content of the distribution of dispositions, experiences, and judgments across positions.

Christian Smith's Response to John Levi Martin

Looks like John Levi Martin *did* want to knock my theoretical lights out. His punches, however, are swats in the air. What a disappointment. His review is confused and in places ridiculous. His representation of my argument is mediocre, and his criticisms, despite their air of erudition, are misinformed and slipshod. Perhaps he went overboard with the Editor's recent admonition against reviewers being "Nice Nellies." Perhaps he fell prey to what Freud called the "narcissism of small differences." I do not know. But he blew an opportunity to advance a valuable discussion.

For starters, JLM ignores nearly half of my book, including a chapter on network structuralism and a key chapter theorizing social structures, their ontology, organization, reproductive powers, and vulnerabilities to change. Having just published his own book on social structures, you would think he would be interested. Instead, he leaves readers with no idea it even exists. He also pays only passing notice to two chapters on morality and human dignity. And he slights the phenomenological epistemology I advance, which actually helps answer his "but how do we know?" questions.

JLM's errors of commission start in his first sentence, where he says my book "begins with a number of critiques" and that the conventional social science I criticize is "variables sociology." That is odd. The first 100-plus pages are frame-setting and constructive. My critique does not begin until page 119. And I do have a chapter on variables sociology, but not until page 227. The problems my book criticizes are in fact much bigger than mere variables sociology. Strange

that he thought otherwise. But a *lot* of what he writes is strange. JLM mind-bogglingly says I conceptually collapse truth and reality, when my repeated argument on the matter to the contrary could not be clearer. He claims that my critique focuses on extremists. I did not realize that people like Barry Wellman, Karin Knorr-Cetina, Harrison White, Ferdinand Saussure, and Earl Babbie were extremists. Even so, he obviously missed my repeated explanation for why I intentionally address some "out there" writers as well as mainstream scholars (see the part about "intellectual chicken" and the influence of extreme claims on moderate thinkers). His passing assertion that my case for human dignity "contradict[s my] previous claims about emergence" simply shows that he does not understand emergence as critical realism explains it. His idea that I "declare...impossible" that "some teams could win at the expense of others" and "some groups thrive by squashing others" simply does not follow from my argument—what kind of sociologist could possibly think them impossible? His claim that, "for a work of theory, there is not a great deal of analysis here," because I do not engage enough in "the manipulation of ideas," is actually funny.

I am especially mystified about JLM deciding that I think causation is about "mattering" (whatever that means). Causation, I write clearly, is about real entities possessing natural powers and capacities to *make change happen* in reality or to *prevent change*. Where he got the "mattering" bit is anyone's guess, but it skews his analysis. I actually do, contrary to his claim, connect causation and

reality in a way that *is* "definitional," but not because "things that are real usually have causal effects" (which gets it backwards) and certainly not because I want to "reserve the possibility of promoting numbers to the status of real" (I raised that issue as a side curiosity). Instead, having causal powers is one key criterion (along with being material) for identifying what is real: if something causes change in the world, retroductively it must be real; unreal things cannot exert causal powers. But that basic idea was apparently lost on JLM, so he proceeds to misinterpret me through his "mattering" lens.

The confusions continue. JLM's posed "problem" for my account of causation and reality (about what led to the decline in real wages in the last three decades) is a faked difficulty. It starts off stuck on the misguided matter of "mattering," and then plays helpless in face of the obvious answer: that careful empirical and reasoned analysis of precisely the sort my book explains can help us to understand what is real and how it worked in such cases. JLM is lost here in the basic distinction between reality and the conceptual abstractions we construct to name and understand reality, which is always conceptually mediated in human personal knowledge. (Lest readers wonder whether JLM was confused because my book is confusing, note that it won the American Publisher's 2011 "Choice Award for Professional and Scholarly Excellence, Top 25 Academic Books List," in the Philosophy category—meaning, U.S. publishers recommend it for widespread reading in all kinds of libraries—not what we would expect of a confusing book.)

JLM is also dismissive of a number of serious points that are well developed in my book. For example, he mocks the "alethic" theory of truth on which I rely (which he calls the "altheaic" theory, revealing something about his knowledge and attention to detail). Mine is in fact a serious philosophical position, defended in a powerful and award-winning book by Syracuse University philosopher William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Cornell University Press, 1997). JLM just trivializes it. He also makes sport of my prioritizing ontology over epistemology (like parents asking kids to run before they walk), but in that only shows

how little he understands critical realism, and how he (like so many) is lost in modernity's epistemic paper bag from which he is unable to find his way out. That helps explain why he gets hung up on realism as unable to be "rigorously demonstrated." I repeat here what I explain in the book and what recurrent failures of epistemology-first approaches since Descartes have shown: starting with epistemology before having any grounding in ontology inevitably leads to paralyzing skepticism or (to try to avoid that) intellectual dishonesty and theoretical smuggling. It leads to *never* being "sure if our knowledge of the world is valid." In fact, to believe that we, as embodied, highly-capacitated animals engaged in physical and other practices that have real consequences in a material and relational world, must begin with an epistemological theory before we can know anything reliable is absurd. Critical realism by contrast opens the door to realize that understanding "what the world is like" is not dependent on first being "sure" that "our knowledge of the world is valid"—precisely because reality actually is "like" something definite in and of itself, by virtue of the being, nature, structure, and capacities of the entities that compose it. What we can justifiably believe we understand truthfully is therefore finally driven by what *is*, rather than being controlled by some theory about what we supposedly can and cannot know.

JLM does not get this, but continues to lampoon ideas that are his invented misunderstandings: "CR tells us to be perfect." I present "a world constructed" in which "good and bad simply come from [my, Smith's] own declarations." My response to legit fears of authoritarianism in ethics is to admit to "fallibility, which seems hardly comforting." "Smith's approach logically leads to the solipsism he suspects follows social constructionism. Or else one person's reality is real—Smith's." And it all probably simply amounts to, "Who is Christian Smith?" This silliness may satisfy a "gotcha!" sense of humor but do nothing to address the real issues.

JLM says that I think "because our framework for understanding the world shears into many levels," I am therefore "sure that we live in a multilayered reality." Here he

again mistakenly begins with epistemology (our analytical “framework for understanding”) rather than ontology, which trips him up. What I clearly argue instead, following critical realism, is that reality simply *is* by ontological nature complex, structured, and stratified, to which we as knowers subsequently respond with our beliefs about reality as such; and so our personal knowledge of it must and does rely on different approaches and disciplines to get at its various levels. JLM cannot seem to get that. He also claims that my emphasis on causal mechanisms is not integrated with my personalism, which betrays his being caught in non-critical-realist thinking about mechanisms and not comprehending my argument about causation. His implication that my argument promotes “grand ethics that look good on paper and are followed by no one” is daffy. Besides the fact that the neo-Aristotelian ethics I reply upon are among the least “grand” approach to morality existing, many of the kinds of ethical implications commended by it are in fact practiced by a lot of people. What is JLM *talking about*?

As to his faulting me for not giving a more detailed exposition of the critical realism, I plainly write that many good books about critical realism already exist, to which I refer readers. Why should I spend 30,000 words repeating what others have already well explained? Books like mine can legitimately presuppose and reference knowledge established elsewhere. If people cannot grasp what books are saying because they do not know the necessary background, then they need to go learn that background. JLM feels authorized to discuss the finer points of realism, but he actually does not understand what *critical* realism is about (there is more than one kind of realism). Fine. But he should not pretend otherwise and then launch critiques based on his unfamiliarity and misunderstandings.

JLM *is* right on one matter: “de-personalization is intrinsic to our idea of social science.” But the problem is not that social science *must* be de-personalizing, as he hints. The problem is that most of *our current ideas* of social science are de-personalizing. Challenging them and offering an alternative is what my book attempts. But JLM says “that is really asking for far too

much.” For social science to not de-humanize and de-personalize humanity is asking too much? We should settle for a morally nihilistic social science? No, we do “need a different analytical vocabulary”—that offered by *critical realism*. By contrast, JLM’s flight from “theories of stuff science” only throws us back on Kant’s impossible divorce of the phenomenal from the noumenal, which mis-describes our real predicament and causes endless troubles.

JLM’s general style reflects a disease widespread in the humanities and social sciences. It begins by asking “but how do we know/decide?,” then worries that anything we claim is real “is not in fact universally essential,” and then with unjustified self-satisfaction strings us out in a pseudo-sophisticated uncertainty (while simultaneously smuggling all kinds of unacknowledged “verities” in the back door). This combination of epistemological foundationalism and dubious pragmatism is bizarre. The outcome is sheer limbo—stylish limbo, perhaps, chic limbo, but debilitating limbo nevertheless. Having lost faith (in the obvious fact) that we humans are part of and connected to *nature*, we end up drifting in the stratosphere of relative social constructions, which leaves us in the end with little to work with but ideology and power. (Then we turn around and assert strong moral claims against injustice and oppression as if we were somehow also moral realists.) That may seem attractive and sophisticated, but it is indefensible, incoherent, a dead end. We must instead come to terms with reality, complex as it is, which means seriously dealing with ontology and causation. Critical realism gives us the best account of how that works, and within that framework, personalism offers the best account of our own human being and its implications for social science.

And “more work remains to be done?” Obviously. Did JLM really think that one book proposed completely to develop a theory of critical realist personalism and all of its implications? Did he notice my book builds upon a previous work on human personhood (*Moral, Believing Animals*, Oxford 2003), and that I say it raises questions and issues that I will address in coming works? You have to love reviewers who fault books for both taking on too much and not taking on

enough, for not being the books the reviewers wanted to have had written, and yet pay them fleeting lip service as being "important" and "persuasive." (Dear Editor: please write your next front piece admonishing reviewers against being "Incoherent Igors.") As to critical realism, whether or not JLM gets or likes it, y'all prepare to hear more about it. Most sociologists on the other side of the Atlantic are very familiar and engaged with it. And some of us are determined to make it equally familiar in the United States, occasional bad book reviews in response notwithstanding.

When the smoke of his review clears, at bottom JLM simply does not like critical

realism—most of his gripes trace back to that difference. He cannot accept that humans can have truthful, if fallible, knowledge about reality, its ontology and causal operations, based on the nature of reality itself, especially when it comes to morality. But his review also makes clear that he actually does not understand critical realism. He is rejecting it before he knows what it is. Consequently, much of what he says is confused, however clever it may sound. Perhaps someday he will come around.

My bottom line: do read his book, which is genuinely good. But ignore his review of my book—read it for yourself and make up your own mind.