

## HUMAN NATURE REVIEW

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### Book Review

*Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* by  
Christian Smith. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Reviewed by

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Christian Smith, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, begins his essay asserting that human beings differ from animals in that we have, as proposed by Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher, "second order desires." We not only have desires and beliefs but also the capacity to evaluate those desires and beliefs. We may hate someone while simultaneously finding that hatred to be unjust. This ability to evaluate our own actions, as if perceiving ourselves from some objective or distant perspective, makes us moral animals. We are not only conscious, but self-conscious. The author quotes the British philosopher Anthony O'Hear: "The very fact of being self-conscious about our beliefs, of being in the full sense believers, initiates a process in which we search for what is true because it is true, rather than because it serves some interest of ours." We need not, and often do not, act morally, and we may share sets of moral values with others or we may not, but we are all moral animals.

For example, a brutal revenge murder by mob hit men set in motion by a Mafia family is not likely to be a random act of irrationality or a mere instrumental move to secure material advantage. Rather, it is the discharging of solemn duties to uphold a certain moral order involving honor, self-respect and vindication.

Indeed, our emotional responses may arise from our moral assumptions. Our social institutions, however, always arise from shared moral sentiments.

The moral is not simply a subjective concern limited to religion, ethical rules, or personal values. Nor are institutions merely

practical arrangements for the accomplishing of functional tasks, like delivering health care and making political decisions. Rather social institutions are always morally embedded enterprises. All social institutions are embedded within and give expression to moral orders that generate, define, and govern them. [This holds true whether] it is obvious on surface appearances or not . . .

The capitalist marketplace and the sciences are not amoral spheres. "Nothing human, even science, escapes moral order." The choices human market capitalists make are not born of innate self interest but out of the moral "order" of market capitalists that value acting out of self-interest. Nevertheless, within the moral fabric of society, human beings as they live and grow, with their capacity to view their own actions as if from a psychological distance, can affect who they will become and what their own moral template for life will be. We have some choice in what we believe.

"Believing Animals" is the title of the author's second chapter. Herein, he establishes that since human beings can not access any absolute truth, we must be *believing* animals. Without an absolute reference point or perspective, we would be lost and therefore must believe in a world view in order to interpret, act, and live. Referring to mankind as *Homo credens*, Smith says, "We are all necessarily trusting, believing animals, creatures who must and do place our faith in beliefs that *cannot themselves be verified except by means established by the beliefs themselves* (Smith's italics). Smith quotes Augustine of Hippo: "I believe that I may understand."

What and how we believe is the subject of the author's next chapter, "Living Narratives." Smith begins by defining a narrative to include the characteristic that it "convey significant points." Then he argues that stories, ballads, and legends are not things of the past. Our periodic tables, genetic maps, technology, and rationality are parts of the story or narrative we now believe in and use to understand and function in the world. We are just as much story-makers as were those who came before us and are, as they were, just as much made by our stories.

We, every bit as much as the most primitive or traditional of our ancestors, are animals who must fundamentally understand what reality is, who we are, and how we ought to live by locating ourselves within the larger narratives and metanarratives that we hear and tell, and that constitute what is for us real and significant.

Smith might have quoted the poet Muriel Rukeyser who said "The universe is composed of stories, not of atoms." Because we are beings that are

aware of the passage of time, our narratives must place us in a historical perspective. The author offers several sample narratives as examples to illustrate the underlying assumptions a narrative might hold, including, among others, the "Scientific Enlightenment narrative" and the "American Experiment narrative:"

Once upon a time our ancestors lived in an old world where they were persecuted for religious beliefs and oppressed by established aristocracies. Land was scarce, freedoms denied, and futures bleak. But then brave and visionary men like Columbus opened up a New World, and our freedom-loving forefathers crossed the oceans to carve out a wilderness, a new civilization. Through bravery, ingenuity, determination, and goodwill, our forefathers forged a way of life where men govern themselves, believers worship freedom, and where anyone can grow rich and become president. This America is genuinely new, a clean break from the past, a historic experiment in freedom and democracy standing as a city on a hill shining a beacon of hope to guide a dark world into a future of prosperity and liberty. It deserves our honor, our devotion and possibly the commitment of our very lives for its defense.

Citing Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist and philosopher, who asserted that "every social order has as its core the sacred," Smith goes on to assert that it is the narrative that defines what is sacred and further that because culture is structured by believing animals who are made by their narratives, "The normative is organized by the narrative." Smith often addresses and refers to his fellow sociologists; in this chapter, he also discusses "The Narratives of American Sociology." He suggests that as humans make and are made by their narratives, sociology might be less a science and something more akin to literary criticism.

In his fifth chapter, Smith discusses religion but he is less interested in what religion is than why it is a part of human life to begin with. What is its origin? "Why in a spiritless and godless world would people ever conceive of spirits and gods in the first place?" The author, as he has in previous chapters, argues against other theories including rational choice theory wherein religion provides rewards and benefits that people will undergo sacrifices to obtain. The author asks how would rational choice theory explain the belief in evil gods and posits his own explanation for the creation and universality of religion. Religion is a manifestation of our capacity to be self-conscious. We watch our own lives, actions and thoughts with this ability to look at ourselves from a distance, from somewhere outside of ourselves. We, then, create our universe in those same terms with a distant consciousness looking at our universe.

To be a human person, to possess an identity, to act with agency requires locating one's life within a larger moral order by which to know who one is and how we ought to live. Human individuals and groups, therefore, must look beyond themselves for sources of moral order that are understood as not established by their own desires, decisions or preferences but instead believed to exist apart from them, providing standards by which their desires, decisions, and preferences can themselves be judged. As believing animals, human faith in superempirical orders that make claims to organize and guide human life is not categorically different from the fundamental and continual acts of presupposing and believing in all of the other assumptions and ideas that make the living of life possible. So humans being religious is epistemologically in continuity with the living of ordinary human life as a whole.

The next chapter, "The Return of Culture," directly addresses current issues in sociology and, one by one, counters the theories of other sociologists on their assertions relating to "human motivation in cultural theory."

The author closes with a summation that outlines his main premises. In much of the book Smith speaks as a sociologist and to other sociologists; nevertheless, his strong arguments on a subject of great scope forge a book meant for all who are interested in human nature and society. Indeed, the book's approach to the reader reflects the very premise of the book. Smith addresses our moral sense with less science and more humanity just as a moral being would address other moral, believing animals especially on the subject of humanity. His narrative enlivens the discourse on human nature and ennobles human beings who are "First, moral, believing, narrating animals--as opposed to rational, acquisitive, exchanging animals and genetically adaptive and governed animals."

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