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Linking Heart and Head as Parallel Systems: A Response to James K.A. Smith’s You Are What You Love

by Donald Roth

“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”² Resolving this vexing contradiction of the Christian life is one of the driving goals behind James K.A. Smith’s recent work, You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit.³ This book is an attempt to reframe Smith’s essential thesis from his Cultural Liturgies series to make it more accessible to a popular audience,⁴ and, as someone who has taught part of Desiring the Kingdom to college seniors for the past several years,⁵ I welcome the effort. The book is clearer and more direct than the earlier volumes, and it provides a refreshing and important counterpoint to the all-too-common excessive intellectualizing of the task of discipleship. I would recommend that at least the first few chapters of this work be mandatory reading for any Christians engaged in thinking about their lived faith, particularly in the college setting.

That said, I believe that Smith’s corrective veers into the realm of an overcorrection and that we should consider certain points to avoid swinging from thinking of humans as “brains-on-a-stick” to “guts-with-a-mouth.” Ultimately, an integrated consideration of the roles of both head and heart/gut is essential, and I believe that imagination can play a critical role in connecting the two. In order to develop this argument, I will first summarize and review Smith’s thesis as presented in this book; then I will point out some of the stress points that suggest this is an overcorrection, and I will provide a framework for tweaking Smith’s model. Finally, I will close with my thoughts on how imagination plays a critical connective role in this model.

You Are What You Love: Summarizing Smith’s Arguments

I began with a quote from Romans, not so much because it is an explicit organizing principle for Smith as that answering the unvoiced “why?” of that statement is the insight that drives the structure of the book. Why do we so often act inconsis-

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ently with our avowed beliefs? The answer is that human action is defined more by our desires than by our thoughts; we may not actually desire what we think we do, and this is because what we do (especially habitually) actually has a crucial impact in shaping what we want. Together, these three arguments make up Smith’s central thesis and frame the structure of the book. In order to evaluate this thesis, then, we must first consider each of these arguments in turn.

At the heart of Smith’s work is the idea that mankind is not so much homo sapiens as homo litturgicus. That is, humans are more than just thinking things; instead, quite literally, humans are creatures of habit, driven by their desires and shaped by their hunger for some social vision of the good life. Central to this argument are two ideas drawn from Augustine: first, we are beings made “by and for the Creator,” inscribed with a natural drive to pursue some telos, and, second, this drive is animated not by our heads but by our hearts, or, as Smith argues, our guts. Smith supports this argument by pointing out that abstract concepts and rules fail to really motivate people to action; instead, he says we are indexed to pursue a kingdom, that is, a more comprehensive and metaphorical vision of what the good life entails. This vision appeals to our hearts and our longings, rather than our rational minds, and Smith sees our longings then both orienting us toward this vision and propelling us toward it by something Smith calls our “erotic compass.” This is why Smith sees the primary task of discipleship as being about recalibrating our compasses and schooling our desires with virtuous habits that nurture a longing for the true Kingdom of God.

Smith’s second argument is that if we find some of our actions inconsistent with what we think we should do, it is likely so because we do not love or desire what we think. Following the logic from the previous argument, if we are creatures of habit defined by what we love, then our inconsistent actions speak to inconsistent loves and desires in our heart. Smith urges his readers to search out or examine these competing loves by learning to “exegete the rituals we’re immersed in.” Smith extends the logic of the myth of religious neutrality to argue that not just our beliefs but our practices are laden with a structure and direction that orients them toward some vision of the good life. The exegesis that Smith encourages is the examination of our habitual practices and what accompanies them to see if they nudge us toward a kingdom that is in accord with the one Christians profess to seek or not. As an example, Smith offers an updated exegesis of the Mall from Desiring the Kingdom, arguing that the shopping experience at a North American shopping mall seeks to instill in shoppers the gospel of consumerism, a view of the world which greatly differs from the Gospel of Christ. Extending his first argument, this second argument suggests that we might not love what we think because our desires are formed on a gut level by what we are trained to long for, often on an unconscious level.

This point leads to Smith’s third argument, which is that our habits serve to habituate and train us in what we should love. The majority of the remainder of the book is then made up of developing this idea in different settings, such as the church, home, school, and workplace. Smith’s essential purpose is to tease out how a discipleship centered around intellectual understanding will fail to capture the heart, which, subject to so many competing loves and liturgies, will inevitably be led astray. Smith isn’t saying, however, that a habit-oriented approach will result in perfection; instead, he sees intentional participation in certain habits, particularly the liturgies of corporate worship, as a continual resetting of our heart’s compass in response to the fact that it is so easily derailed, and he sees this process as the core of faithful discipleship. Ultimately, Smith is encouraging Christians to pay more attention to formative practices and to recover a lost emphasis on virtue as habituated holiness, focusing less on individual instances of sin than on the destructive habits that inculcate vice, realizing that this may be a broader category of practices than we traditionally suspect.

There is a compelling and near-syllogistic logic to Smith’s thesis. A significant portion of the human experience is defined by habitual practices. Nothing is religiously neutral, so the practices we engage in will nudge us either toward or away from God. Therefore, we must turn a critical eye toward the practices we engage in, being more wary of those that disorder while more enthusiastically embracing those that reorient our loves to God.
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The thesis can be cast in more explicitly theological terms as well. While Satan is sometimes called the king of lies, he is more often referred to as the tempter.19 While we acknowledge that the Devil’s great tool is appealing to our desires, we too often overlook a few key aspects of this fact: first, desire is not the sole domain of the Devil but is, in fact, something which God craves from us as much, if not more;20 and, second, if we consider that Satan, certainly not incapable of appealing to our minds, prefers to pursue our desires, should we not consider that appealing to desires might in fact be the more powerful pathway to our hearts? From a different direction, Scripture often refers to Christians as children, even commending a childlike faith to us. Yet how do children learn, particularly in their earliest phases? By imitation. Smith emphasizes this insight and argues that this is why Scripture speaks of “being imitators of Christ” and “putting on Christ.”21 Thus we can see that Smith’s thesis rests in a logical and theological insight that has tremendous persuasive force; it’s for this reason that I believe the book has such great value for anyone who reads it.

From Thinking Things to Groaning Guts: Smith’s Pendulum Swing

Despite Smith’s deep insights into these issues of discipleship, I believe the chief failing of his book is not so much one of content but of emphasis. I say this because I do not believe Smith disagrees with what I have to say (indeed, my reading of some of his other works suggests that we may think in largely parallel lines on these issues); instead, my primary concern is that the rhetoric that Smith employs seems to devalue or underemphasize the role that the thinking mind plays, running from a critique of mankind as “brains-on-a-stick” to view them instead as “guts (hearts)-with-a-mouth.” One example of this is in Smith’s choice of words, particularly many uses of “instead,” a word suggesting rejection of one in favor of the other. For instance, in calling “our idolatries … more liturgical than theological,” Smith says, “Instead of being on guard for false teachings and analyzing culture in order to sift out the distorting messages, we need to recognize that there are rival liturgies everywhere.”22 If taken on its face, this statement seems to stand in tension with extensive Scriptural warnings about the dangers of false teachers and teachings.23 Similarly, when Smith argues that a vision of flourishing motivates us more than rules or duties, he uses the “instead” language to dismiss the motivating power of duty in favor of his alternative, placing things on an either/or spectrum that may not be accurate.24 Finally, in arguing for his vision of ministry to children, Smith uses “instead” to apparently reject catechesis based around something like the Heidelberg Catechism as being “centered on an abstract framework of doctrine lifted from the outline of systematic theology,” while promoting his favored “liturgical catechesis” of playing church with child-sized pulpits, baptismal fonts, and ecclesiastical regalia.25 Again, not that inviting children into the imaginary of the church is at all bad, but Smith’s language suggests a sort of either/or spectrum that he at other places seems to reject.26 Overall, while there are counter-examples, and I tried to read Smith as charitably as I could, I could not avoid coming away from his book with a sense that Smith is not arguing to add an awareness of the power of habit to our thoughts about the power of the intellect so much as to replace the latter with the former.

The potential danger in following Smith in what seems to be a pendulum swing is best exemplified for me in his discussion of both the Scholastic Reformers and the role of the sermon in worship. Smith aligns himself with Charles Taylor’s criticism of the later Reformers and their emphasis on hearing the Word (preaching) as a process of excarnation, the disembodiment of the faith that runs directly counter to the incarnation that is so important in Christianity.27 This harsh critique of the later generations of the Reformation doesn’t square with my experience of reading many of them, nor with the broader overviews provided by the likes of Smith’s colleague Richard Muller in his Post-Reformation...
Reformed Dogmatics series or Arie De Reuver’s vignettes on the spirituality of many of the foremost figures in the Nadere Reformatie as contained in his volume Sweet Communion. More important than this quibble, though, is that Smith seems to carry the critique through to a rather low view of the preaching of the Word. In Smith’s description of the liturgical flow of worship, the sermon rates barely a sentence (he gives listening to the law proclaimed a point of primacy in the “listening” stage of worship), ceding the climax of the service to the Lord’s Supper. Further, Smith calls pastors “ethnographers of the everyday” who should focus on helping congregations “name and ‘exegete’ their local liturgies.” To avoid swinging on my own pendulum, I should note that Smith still speaks of the sermon as a means of grace, but the element is undeniably downplayed from the role it holds in traditional Reformed worship. It would be a diversion from the thesis of this paper to dig further into the theological reasons for greater emphasis on the preached word, but I chose this aside as an example of how Smith’s emphasis on habit and liturgy tends to supplant, rather than supplement, emphases on things like worldview or preaching, and I do find that penchant troubling, particularly in the latter case.

Heads and Hearts: Not Extremes, but Parallel Systems
If I am not reading Smith uncharitably in the previous section, then the next step is to provide a useful reframing for his thesis, and I believe that reframing is to shift from the competitive binary that colors the book toward viewing head and heart as parallel systems. Specifically, I believe it is useful to map Smith’s insights onto the insights of someone that Smith cites in passing at one point, Daniel Kahneman, the award-winning psychologist and author of Thinking, Fast and Slow. Kahneman develops the earlier work of Stanovich and West, who spoke of humans operating in terms of two systems. System 1 is our intuitive, emotional core, and it “operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control,” while System 2 “allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it” and is “often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration.” The reason I find this approach a valuable reframing of what Smith argues comes in what Kahneman says next:

When we think of ourselves, we identify with System 2, the conscious, reasoning self that has beliefs, makes choices, and decides what to think about and what to do. Although System 2 believes itself to be where the action is, the automatic System 1 is the hero of the book. I describe System 1 as effortlessly originating impressions and feelings that are the main sources of the explicit beliefs and deliberate choices of System 2.

The parallels between this System 1 and 2 model and the head/heart discussion in Smith are striking, and the model echoes much of what Smith argues. While we identify with our System 2 “selves,” we underestimate the role of System 1, which is in fact responsible for the lion’s share of what we do and how we act. Further, Kahneman’s book recounts a number of experiments which testify to the formative power of System 1, supporting Smith’s thesis that we are missing something significant if we do not appeal to the longings and desires that animate our hearts (System 1). Ultimately, while I don’t think Smith’s approach maps flawlessly onto Kahneman’s model, the latter provides both support and further clarity for thinking about Smith. Most importantly, Kahneman’s model provides further details that help to resolve some of the tensions in Smith’s thesis. Specifically, Kahneman adds,

System 1 continuously generates suggestions for System 2: impressions, intuitions, intentions, and feelings. If endorsed by System 2, impressions and intuitions turn into beliefs, and impulses turn into voluntary actions. When all goes smoothly, which is most of the time, System 2 adopts the suggestions of System 1 with little or no modification. You generally believe your impressions and act on your desires, and that is fine—usually.

This idea functions as a bit of an addendum to Smith’s “you are what you love,” affirming that idea, but with the caveat that the head may be able to step in and help to guide the direction of the heart. In summarizing the concept, Kahneman
puts it aptly: “[M]ost of what you (your System 2) think and do originates in your System 1, but System 2 takes over when things get difficult, and it normally has the last word.”

For all of Smith’s emphasis on habit and the operation of our unconscious desires, his thesis tacitly adopts this last nuance too, even if it is largely unacknowledged. We may very well be what we love, but our head still has the ability to pull on the reins. This happens in multiple ways. For one, while Smith cites psychologist Timothy Wilson’s claim that “only about 5 percent of what we do in a given day is the outcome of conscious, deliberate choices we make,” he does not ask how much meaning we attach to the various things we do in a day. Certainly, we should not forget the formative effect of the 95% of the time where System 2 doesn’t step in, but we cannot underestimate the importance of the times when it does. In other words, the 5% of the day where the head leads the heart may be some of the most meaningful parts of the day, though not the sum total of its meaning.

In fact, Smith’s entire endeavor rests on this assumption. Smith urges us to choose to embrace liturgies which re-center and reform us. Our ability to make that choice originates to a significant degree in the head, even if only as a way of seeking to more consistently pursue our ultimate heart desire of serving God. At the same time, in his example of learning to exercise, Smith says he decided to “commit [himself] to practices that [he] didn’t want to do.” Even though he didn’t want to, Smith forced himself to run regularly until he finally wanted to do it. Implicit in this approach (and his success) is the fact that Smith was able to utilize his head to school his heart. At some point, Smith had to be intellectually convinced of the advisability of his plan, yet the real shift came when he committed to practices which rehabituated his desires. Of course, the second part of this is Smith’s thesis in action (real change comes from changed desire), but the first step, that period of intellectual assent, was still crucial to the result and essential in the beginning, and Smith doesn’t integrate this into his thesis in the way that Kahneman’s model does.

Overall, the parallel system model takes the head and heart out of competition with one another. It acknowledges the primacy of the heart in the majority of our being, but it retains a crucial and formative role for the intellect that I find lacking to some extent in the tenor of Smith’s book. Furthermore, taking some of the insights from both Kahneman and Smith suggests a mechanism for how head and heart can change.

Hand in Hand: How Imagination Harnesses Habit

If we have it set out for ourselves that we want to change our habitual, instinctive response to something; how can we go about doing so in a lasting way? Taking insights from Kahneman, these changes are difficult to make for two reasons: simply continuing to intentionally intervene on a conscious level is cognitively taxing, and, while System 2 is fast with complex thought, it can’t match the speed of instinct or gut reactions. Ideally, then, our heads can interpose on our hearts in a language that our hearts can speak, something that can almost automatically indicate what we should do. Similarly, our hearts will speak to our heads in a language our heads can understand, providing a base of images and associations that fuel the complex understanding that our intellect thrives on. My contention is that this point of contact is our imagination.

Despite Smith’s deep insights into these issues of discipleship, I believe the chief failing of his book is not so much one of content but one of emphasis.

Smith discusses this idea, or something near to it, in Imagineing the Kingdom, although he focuses on the heart to head feedback direction. In discussing ideas from Mark Johnson’s The Meaning of the Body, Smith talks about “primary metaphors,” the concept that repeated exposure to certain sensorimotor operations imbues them with a sort of “felt inference,” such as the association of psychological intimacy with physical proximity when we say “we’re close” or “he seems distant.” For Johnson, these primary metaphors are building blocks for more
abstract conceptual metaphors, but the central idea is that our experience in our environment provides a wealth of connections that can then become building blocks that help our brains form more complex cognitive connections. In other words, our more automatic interactions with the world around us help to create a narrative vocabulary that enables us to put expression to far more complex or abstract thoughts and ideas. Smith rightly connects this phenomenon with liturgy, saying that the environment that we immerse ourselves in will then inevitably affect our worldview because its liturgies to some degree provide the vocabulary that allows us to express that worldview.\(^4\)

Smith invests these liturgical environments with special power because of the metaphors that they generate, saying, “[d]ifferent operative metaphors give us a very different world—and different callings within it.”\(^5\) I used the same term, with a very similar meaning, when I wrote about a framework for understanding the debate between the so-called Two Kingdom and Neo-Kuyperian theological camps.\(^6\) In that article, I described how the two sides favored specific metaphors for discipleship, which I identified as pilgrims and kingdom citizens, and how these had a shaping effect on the ways those parties envisioned their roles as disciples. Essentially, I believe Smith and I are talking about a similar concept, only he’s emphasizing how our heart shapes the metaphors that our mind uses, while I emphasized how the metaphors that we use can shape what our heart desires, and it is metaphor heading in this direction that I think is a particularly important missing piece of Smith’s thesis.

Smith affirms something similar to this idea when he talks about the importance of orienting visions of the kingdom.\(^7\) While he talks about this vision operating at an unconscious level, it is made up of a rich set of metaphors and imaginative elements that can be embedded in that unconscious level by conscious choice. That is, we can find metaphors that resonate for us, and we can choose to embrace them and act upon them, working them into our heart intentionally until they operate on that automatic level where, when presented with a situation, they speak to our response just like instinct. In discipleship, I think this phenomenon is particularly true with what I’ve called operative metaphors: specific images with a narrative quality that almost automatically fills in the blanks left by bare commands such as loving God and neighbor.

I believe that these metaphors operate on both the level of what we think of the role of discipleship and the level of how we imagine the kingdom—I hope to explore this idea at more length soon—but taking just the examples of pilgrim and citizen should be enough to make the point. When imbued with nuance and metaphorical connections, a term like pilgrim takes on a life of its own. It encourages a less ultimate affection for the trappings of the culture we’re immersed in, and it cultivates a longing for the not-yet. The closely-related exile or “resident alien” metaphor is the orienting theme for Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon in their book *Resident Aliens*, who seat these aliens in a colony as an operative metaphor for how the kingdom breaks in to the already.\(^8\) Without extensively summarizing the book here, I would include the idea that being a resident alien or being in a colony carries with it so much implied action that, whether you would reject or embrace the metaphor, it is not hard to easily imagine dozens of actionable implications. When embraced and implanted, Christians who think of themselves as resident aliens can more easily imagine and faithfully improvise on that role when presented with novel questions, challenges, or just the day-to-day task of seeking to live faithfully.

I don’t believe it would be unfair to place Smith in the camp of those who resonate with the kingdom citizen metaphor, for evidence of its implications appears throughout his book. Specifically, however, I would focus on the example of Smith’s discussion of “Tradition for Innovation.”\(^9\) Imagine a citizen of a kingdom working to restore, rebuild, and expand a holy city; then read pages 178 through 181. Drawing on the rich language of a building metaphor, Smith urges readers to engage in this task with a strong vision for the telos of shalom. Smith’s book puts its emphasis on how we imagine the kingdom, but it carries with it the implied role of builder when it considers how we are pursuing that kingdom. Imagining oneself as a builder has a powerful impact on how one approaches the task of discipleship.

Even if I have convincingly argued my thesis of operative metaphors, I haven’t yet proven my more
narrow thesis of imagination acting as a bridle on the heart, with perhaps metaphor as the bit or point of formative contact between head and heart. For a simple example of this, I would return to Smith’s description of how he became more physically active. He talks about forcing himself to run until he became a runner; however, this example places great emphasis on the process of habit-forming without attending to how the mind helped in the solidification of that habituation. A key part of this process was that Smith had to adopt and then try to embrace thinking of himself as a runner. This process included an imaginative component of who he sought to be, at first forcibly imposed by his mind, but then gradually and more deeply adopted by both heart and head through habituation. The counterpoint to this process would be the practice of tracking meals that he also engaged in. While Smith sought to be someone who eats healthily, he was not seeking to be someone who tracks his every meal; therefore, despite his extended habitual practice of tracking, that practice fell away when Smith was more firmly rooted in his desired practice of eating well.

This point suggests not only that one can decide to put on virtue through habitual practice, but also that doing so takes the intentional decision to weave it into the imaginative self in order to really solidify the behavior. That is, when the two parallel systems work together, with the head speaking the heart’s language, the heart can also be nudged to walk in a certain direction.

Overall, we need a robust respect and consideration for both the head and the heart and the formative roles that they play in who we are.

Endnotes

1. I want to acknowledge Justin Vos and the important role he played in helping me think through and research many aspects of the thoughts and thesis contained herein.
2. Romans 7:19 (ESV).
5. I teach Core 399: Calling, Task, & Culture, the capstone of Dordt College’s CORE curriculum, which focuses on issues of discipleship and worldview.
8. Ibid., 8; Smith makes a further argument for his “gut” translation of kardia later at 58.
9. Ibid., 11-12.
10. Ibid., 12-15.
11. Ibid., 19.
12. Ibid., 40.

13. For structure and direction, see Ibid., 58. For specific reference to the application of the myth of neutrality, see Ibid., 76-78.

14. Ibid., 46-53. For Smith’s original explanation of the liturgy of the mall, see Desiring the Kingdom, 97-98.

15. This makes up chapters 3-4 (church), 5 (home), 6 (school), and 7 (work).

16. Ibid., 74-77.

17. Ibid., 16.

18. Ibid., 16.

19. See, e.g. Matthew 4:3, and 1 Thessalonians 3:5.

20. See, e.g. how the Lord addresses His people in Deuteronomy 10:12-16 (ESV) “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.” (emphasis added) It’s worth noting that this passage says precious little about seeking right understanding or knowledge, but rather emphasizes practice and the Lord’s desire for the hearts of His people.


22. Ibid., 23.


24. You Are What You Love, 11. For instance, what if someone sees himself or herself as an honorable person? Duty may have significant persuasive sway when seated within this context. Similarly, many parents raise their children within the context of rules and boundaries, particularly at a very young age. My impression from chapters 5 & 6 is that Smith would not reject the usefulness (temporary at times) of bounding our children with rules, not just seeking to win their hearts to a shared kingdom vision.

25. Ibid., 141-42.

26. See, e.g. Id. at 155, where Smith affirms the fact that schools should still be seeking to teach students some sort of information about their subjects, not just seeking formative practices.

27. Ibid., 101.


31. Ibid., 40, 54 (respectively).


34. Ibid., 21.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 24.

37. Ibid., 25.


39. Ibid., 62.


41. Ibid., 123.

42. Ibid.


44. You Are What You Love, 10-11.


47. This is a useful metaphor, although it might too strongly imply either the head’s ability to direct everything (making us the rider) or the ultimate fact that even if the rider yanks on the reins, a stubborn horse doesn’t have to comply. Maybe if the head were the horse and the heart the rider? Of course, that violates the reality of who does the lion’s share of the work. Suffice it to say, I don’t think this analogy is perfect, just instructive.

48. Ibid., 62.

49. Ibid., 63-64.

50. Ibid.