

Anthony Comegna ([00:20](#)):

Hello, everyone. And welcome to another week of Ideas and Progress. I have to say, to start out this episode, that the program we'll focus on this week and next week, in fact, has been in the works for a really long, long time, about a year, maybe even a little bit more. IHS's own Bill Glod, who's been on the show, approached me back then with the idea for a discussion colloquium on the topic of mental health. And he said that he'd been hoping for a long time that this was an area IHS would break into. Well, I of course leapt at the notion. But little did I know that once we actually hosted the program, it would be among the more important subjects we have covered in many, many years now. Though we originally planned to host this program in person back in April, we of course had to cancel that and convert it on line.

Anthony Comegna ([01:14](#)):

And by the time we actually held it in July, then it had become apparent to virtually everyone that individual and social mental health would be absolutely under assault, and therefore critically worth protecting. Virtually all of us, from the most marginalized and mentally embattled, to the most gentle and powerful people with every means at their disposal have been ground under the wheel of the COVID crisis, George Floyd's murder, and the generally panicky atmosphere of a national election with highly anticipated results. There may indeed not have been any other point in IHS's very long history when the topic liberty, responsibility, and mental health have been more important and relevant to current events.

Anthony Comegna ([02:06](#)):

So as we kick off the show today, I want to give special thanks first to Bill Glod for his wonderful idea and his role as program director for this event, and then to Professor Sean Rife for leading our discussion. Let's get to it then with psychologist Sean Rife on an exceptionally important week of ideas in progress. Okay. So Sean, to start us off here, I'm hoping that you could just tell me sort of a bit about the event. This was a discussion colloquium on liberty, responsibility and mental health, primarily with graduate students, though there were a few faculty members in the crowd too. I'm just wondering. Could you give us an overview of how it was set up and how the discussion went? What sort of general impressions did you have from it?

Sean Rife ([02:55](#)):

Yeah. So I thought it was a great event, originally scheduled to be on the ground, but of course wasn't able to do that due to the pandemic, so I moved it online. And I think it went really about as close to perfect as you can imagine. Everyone was really engaged. The discussion we centered around a set of writings that sort of intersect between psychology and the law. Going back to some early writings on mental health and wellbeing, and sort of getting into human nature and dualism and then rounding out with some critiques of the profession. And I think that it was very clear that everyone at the colloquium was very engaged. Everyone had read carefully and taken great notes. And we had really great participation all around from pretty much every single person at the event. I was really impressed.

Anthony Comegna ([03:50](#)):

Just a bit about your background, you're a psychology professor. How did you get into psychology in the first place? What interested you in the topic? And especially as a classical liberal, what is that like teaching psychology from that point of view?

Sean Rife ([04:08](#)):

So I think there are maybe three classical liberal social psychologists that I know, and I'm one of them. So it's an interesting position to be in. And I guess going back in terms of how I got into this field, when I was an undergraduate just starting out at community college, honestly didn't even think I would finish out the semester when I first started college. But I really enjoyed it and came to realize that the things that I was most interested in were social questions, and put a lot of stock in the ability to address social questions scientifically. So I really gravitated towards the humanities and eventually the social sciences for that reason. And gravitated towards psychology because at the time, my impression was that it was a more rigorous scientific discipline than related fields like anthropology, or sociology, or political science.

Sean Rife ([05:10](#)):

And it seemed to address questions that I was interested in using the experimental method, which I at the time viewed as a really important attribute of any sort of social investigation, and also, not for nothing, my impression was at the time that if you could understand people on a psychological level, then you could start from the ground up and build your understanding of societies and political systems based on that understanding of human nature and individual differences. Both of those assumptions actually later turned out to be wrong. I later pretty much renounced both of those assumptions, but that's what got me into the field initially.

Anthony Comegna ([05:51](#)):

That's interesting to me because when I was in high school, I really was convinced. I found a website where a professor, this was a long time ago, so very few professors had websites, and this guy had put all of his course lectures in very detailed notes on his website. And I was just sort of writing a paper or something and came across this website and just consumed all of it as a ninth grader or something. And I was just convinced that, that is what I wanted to do. I was so interested in all the different psychological theories out there about what people are and why. And then I found out, oh, you have to be an actual scientist. I don't know if I can do that, so I went into history.

Sean Rife ([06:44](#)):

Well, that's a great observation that you do have to be an actual scientist. I wish that is an observation, my cynicism is going to start to show here, but I wish that observation was made by more people in my field. One thing that I have learned, and it's really changed the trajectory of my career is that psychology is simply at this point not a sufficiently mature science. I mean, I don't know if you've been doing any of the readings about the replication crisis or any of that. But it's becoming increasingly clear that a lot of the things that we thought we knew about psychology, we simply don't know. So like I said, I wish that more psychologists would make that observation and really pursue science qua science more carefully.

Anthony Comegna ([07:38](#)):

Now my memory is a little fuzzy here. But weren't you saying that you are actually engaged in regular work on the replication crisis and trying to figure out how to fix those problems? Or am I misremembering that?

Sean Rife ([07:53](#)):

Yeah, no. So my lab is heading up a multi sites, an international effort to replicate one really central theory within social psychology called terror management theory. And basically the idea is that humans are uniquely self aware in terms of their own mortality. We're aware that we're going to die, and that makes us somewhat different than other animals. And that as a result, if we're made aware of our own mortality, we engage in certain behaviors or certain cognitions like being more like to endorse certain religious beliefs or social norms because those are things which are in some sense transcendent of death.

Sean Rife ([08:36](#)):

So the idea is that all sorts of social attitudes are related to our fear of death. And this is a theory that it's really interesting because the people who originated the theory seem to have no trouble getting it to replicate. And certainly, it has been replicated plenty of times. But I know multiple people who have tried to replicate this theory in their own labs and failed to do so. And in fact, there was just recently one earlier replication attempt that has sort of a different twist to it that generally speaking, failed. So we're testing it now in my lab. I think we have 26 different labs across the world who are trying to replicate that particular one study related to that theory.

Anthony Comegna ([09:24](#)):

Let's go back a little bit to talk more about classical liberalism in psychology. I mean, you said you're one of three people that you know who intersect in those two communities. Why do you think that is? Why are there so few classical liberal people working in psychology?

Sean Rife ([09:41](#)):

Yeah, that's a really good question. I mean, I think that the two big issues there are I think self selection. So certainly, if I go back to the way I was thinking about social questions when I was younger, I think I could've very easily shifted and become an economist. I mean, behavioral economics is a very close sibling to social psychology. And there's no reason that someone who has my interests would have necessarily gravitated toward psychology over behavioral econ. I think it's just who I was exposed to and what I was reading at the time. So some of that definitely is self selection, and econ is a more sort of classical liberal friendly field.

Sean Rife ([10:30](#)):

I think there's also a certain extent to which the field does not provide a terribly friendly atmosphere for people of the ideological bent. And that also is a problem. I don't think it bothers me too much. It's never really been much of an issue for me personally. I've never really felt sort of overtly discriminated against, although maybe I have and I just don't remember it. But the field is definitely, I think as a whole, sort of hostile to those ideas. And that is a problem. There's a whole series of papers where people are sort of pointing that out and arguing that it's a problem. I think it's just no one's really sure exactly what to do about it.

Anthony Comegna ([11:14](#)):

If you had to guess, what are sort of the standard politics of most people in this field?

Sean Rife ([11:21](#)):

Oh, I don't have to guess at all. People have studied this. Actually, now I'm going to have to guess in terms of remembering the numbers. It's I believe the number of people in the field who self identify as liberal, I believe it's above 80%. Conservative I think is 1% to 3%. And then you have some moderates and classical liberals sort of mixed in there. I think as a self identification, I think classical liberal, libertarian is somewhere around 10%. I may be misremembering this. There's a great paper by Yoel Inbar, who basically asked this question, so I can pull it up here if you want me to and actually find the numbers. But it's something along those lines.

Anthony Comegna ([12:09](#)):

Yeah. That's pretty interesting to know. I'm surprised that libertarian so outpaces conservative there. Now let's shift gears and dig into the readings. That's the stuff I really want to focus on here because I think we had some very cool, somewhat offbeat reading selections here. And of course as you mentioned, we had originally planned this as an in person event back in April. It's been almost a year now, on IHS's end at least, that we've been planning this conference. And of course, it got COVID'ed, and we had to trans-morph it into an online program. But I'm glad to hear it all went very well.

Anthony Comegna ([12:52](#)):

And you and I kind of collaborated on the reading list way back probably in the fall or maybe the winter of 2019, so I'm wondering first. Just can you kind of give us some general reflections on the list of readings and what your point of view was on them? Because the discussion leader frames the discussion, they ask some probing questions. They might respond with their own thoughts from time to time. But overall, you didn't get to do much participation in the discussion yourself. So I'd really like to get some of your thoughts on the reading list as a whole.

Sean Rife ([13:29](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Sure. So I guess the reading list was I think a really good collaboration. I think you asked me specifically if I had any thoughts on readings. And if I recall, I think I said, "Goffman and his work on mental patients and inmates, and also Thomas Szasz, who was sort of a key figure in a libertarian critique of psychiatry, as well as some people who disagree with Szasz because he's a very controversial figure." And so we had some great selections from those areas. But you also added a couple of really interesting sort of earlier pieces, sort of pre psychology pieces, from Thomas Tryon, his Way to Health, and also William Godwin on the Happiness and the Mind. So I think it rounded things out really well.

Sean Rife ([14:23](#)):

In terms of the discussion, it was really great. We started out with the sort of key question because, actually, the Tyron's piece had to be jettisoned from the discussion just out of time constraints due to the online format. But Godwin's work was where we sort of started. And that led into I think a really interesting discussion on dualism and its relationship with sort of psychological questions. And that was something that we came back to on a number of different occasions. I was interested to see that I think about half the panel self identified as dualists, which is certainly not something you see a lot of, at least in my field. People are very sort of materialists, scientists, monists, in our field. So we had a lot of really good diversity there.

Sean Rife ([15:14](#)):

And also, some interesting questions starting out early about sort of resilience and the sort of human need for some degree of challenge, or some degree of, I don't know what the word is, but some set of

problems to solve in your life, or something to overcome, and how that affects us psychologically later on. And so that was the first session.

Anthony Comegna ([15:41](#)):

Yeah. I was actually very glad to hear that several students lamented that we had to cut out the Thomas Tryon reading because it is very fun. If anybody's never looked at that book, and I doubt many have, Thomas Tryon's *Way to Health*, and then there's a massive 17th century subtitle there, but *Way to Health*. It's just a fascinating little book, where he breaks down all sorts of different foods and drinks and herbs and things, and life practices like keeping your house clean and whatever that he takes to be the measure of the way to health and happiness. I picked this in part because I wanted to show historical trajectory to the idea of mental health and wellness. It's also, it was the favorite book of my absolute favorite historical figure right now, a man named Benjamin Lay, who was a Quaker and a little person, and his biographer calls the first revolutionary abolitionist. And so he kept a copy of Tryon's book with him at all times and lived by it, up to and including being essentially a vegan.

Anthony Comegna ([16:54](#)):

And I thought Tryon is a very interesting figure because he incorporates Hinduism and Hindu thought in his very Western production here in a way that I don't believe any Western thinkers had done before him. And he essentially comes out and says, "Look, the more violent we are to animals, the more violent we find ourselves being to each other." You spend your day cutting apart an animal carcass, and suddenly it's much easier to cut apart a human carcass.

Sean Rife ([17:27](#)):

Interesting.

Anthony Comegna ([17:31](#)):

Did you have any reflections on the Tryon reading, even though you didn't get to discuss it in full?

Sean Rife ([17:36](#)):

Yeah, no. So it's really interesting. I think like you said, he was unknown to me until the reading came up. And in fact, not only did people lament it, one thing that's interesting about the reading is that it includes the table of contents, which one participant mentioned it was the most interesting table of contents she had ever read, which I think is an excellent way to describe it. I mean, there are the things that he gets into in here, I mean, the evils of eating and drinking food too hot, the mischief of eating and drinking between meals. I mean, this is sort of predicting, or an early set of thoughts on health psychology of too much snacking.

Sean Rife ([18:21](#)):

So it's wonderfully put together in terms of preceding a bunch of more scientific stuff. Basically, what he's doing in this reading, this piece, is developing a sort of rough topology of personality and talking about how he thinks that relates to the environment, how that relates to behaviors, and most importantly, how that relates to what we eat, what we drink, how we act. So I think it's a wonderful sort of early attempt at developing a topology of personality, just sort of from one man's perspective.

Anthony Comegna ([18:59](#)):

Yeah. I see a lot of echoes to the sort of Paleo diet crowd and stuff like that in [crosstalk 00:19:05].

Sean Rife ([19:05](#)):

Yeah. Definitely.

Anthony Comegna ([19:07](#)):

Well, let's shift gears to Godwin then because you brought up the terms dualism and monism. And I just love William Godwin. Listeners who heard the episode the Crispin Sartwell a few weeks ago will know that. He's just a terribly interesting figure and thinker. I think he's a brilliant stylist, though I understand he's not for everybody. He's the founder of libertarianism and anarchism and socialism and individualism. He's just the font of so many different traditions. So I was curious to see everybody's thoughts on his sort of early version of psychology too. Can you start us off on the Godwin discussion by just breaking down those terms, dualism and monism?

Sean Rife ([19:54](#)):

Sure, yeah. So this goes to a central question that has been with psychology since before psychology was a thing. It goes back to, most people identify it with Descartes, who said that there is the mind and there is the body, and the two are separate. That's called psychological dualism. A monist is someone who believes that, no, we're all basically just sentient bags of organic matter wandering the Earth. I'm dumbing this down a little bit, but that's basically the idea, is that there's no ... A lot of people will sort of think about the mind and soul as kind of intertwined and the same thing, whereas someone who's a monist says, "No. It's all just more physical matter, physicality."

Sean Rife ([20:37](#)):

So that's a really important sort of I think thread that ties a lot of these different readings and a lot of these different traditions together because one thing that we get into later on is this question of diagnosis of psychological disorders, and the fact that that's not something that we locate in the body. They're talked about as mental disorders. They're talked about as mental issues. They're talked about in terms of psychology, not in terms of biology or physicality, typically.

Sean Rife ([21:08](#)):

I mean, there is certainly neuroscience. And there's a whole field devoted to that, but it's nowhere near as mature as other sort of medical fields. So that notion of mind body dualism turns out to be really important for the whole discussion of the formation of psychology as a science and its relationship with the state and the validity of the diagnosis.

Anthony Comegna ([21:31](#)):

I love reading Godwin. I think he's just so much fun to read because he goes on these flights of fancy about how amazing human beings are. And I think that alone is kind of enough to boost your spirits if you're feeling down a little bit. You know?

Sean Rife ([21:47](#)):

It's nowhere ... Because most of the reading that I do, I haven't ... I'm ashamed to say I really don't read much fiction at all. Most of the reading that I do is dry scientific articles, so it's a nice respite from that.

Anthony Comegna ([22:02](#)):

I don't think I've read a fiction book in a decade or more.

Sean Rife ([22:06](#)):

Probably the same for me, yeah. I think I listened to the audiobook, *The Martian*, a couple of years ago, but that was it. I mean, it's a wonderful sort of break from sort of dry prose that I normally am immersed in. And once again, he is, gosh, I have in here in my notes, on a couple of occasions, he talks about sort of ... We were talking about terror management theory earlier. There are a couple of places in here where he talks about that awareness of death and a desire to transcend it. Again, it sort of is an early sort of prologue to what we think of in social psychology today, so I think it was a great choice.

Anthony Comegna ([22:49](#)):

Now I noticed that some folks seem to say that, well, he's maybe a bit too individualistic here. He focuses a little too much on the power of the individual mind and the different problems it might encounter. I know the discussion was really focused on this dualism, monism issue. I'm wondering. Especially as a social psychologist, did you get that same impression from Godwin?

Sean Rife ([23:17](#)):

Yeah. So I think that I didn't have, I think, as much of a strong reaction as some of the other participants did. I certainly understand where they're coming from. And I guess the reason that didn't make such a huge impression on me is one of the conclusions that I've sort of come to is, and it's something that I think I am largely in agreement with Godwin on, is that the fundamental unit of analysis for my field should be the individual person. So there's a through line there with methodological individualism as well as sort of normative individualism. And those are separate things, right? I mean, we might want to study groups of people. We might want to study how groups of people act, and that's fine. But then when I sit down and I ask myself, "Well, what's the fundamental unit of analysis that I'm concerned with?" It's the individual human mind. So I'm mostly, I guess, in agreement with Godwin there, although I think ... So that probably didn't make that strong an impression on me as I think it did some of the other participants.

Anthony Comegna ([24:25](#)):

I think it's also a little bit of a function of just the selections of readings because this book that we picked from, *Thoughts on Man*, I think we picked the first few chapters. But it's basically an escalating series of observations about human beings that all build on one another. So he does spend several chapters later on talking about the impact of social systems and institutions on the health and wellbeing of individual minds. So for example, he has very poor things to say about schooling.

Sean Rife ([24:59](#)):

Interesting. Okay. I must confess I am not as deeply immersed in Godwin, as I've read some of his work previously. I'm familiar with him, but that is interesting. And that doesn't surprise me.

Anthony Comegna ([25:16](#)):

Now we mentioned that a few of these things were a little new for you. I guess that's the more historical material that I picked out. Surprise, surprise. I put in the history stuff. But I am wondering, just to put you on the spot here. What was your single favorite reading in the whole list?

Sean Rife ([25:34](#)):

Oh, gosh. I guess I would have to probably go with the interview with Thomas Szasz. We're jumping ahead a little bit here. But I can't remember the name of the person who did the interview. It's Jonathan Miller. So it's the wonderful back and forth between Miller and Szasz. And normally when you're reading Szasz, he's very sort of straightforward and put together, and he's thought things out. And the beauty of this sort of conversation is that you're seeing Szasz be Szasz and sort of put on the spot in a couple of occasions. I think that's really useful, so that back and forth was really nice. And it's something that I hadn't come across before, so it was new to me.

Anthony Comegna ([26:32](#)):

I think what, Cocaine and Scaffold Bars, or something like that, it's called.

Sean Rife ([26:36](#)):

Yeah. There was another one I think, yes, by Richards.

Anthony Comegna ([26:43](#)):

Okay.

Sean Rife ([26:45](#)):

Critique of the Mental Illness. That was a good one too, yes, definitely.

Anthony Comegna ([26:51](#)):

Sean Rife is an assistant professor of psychology at Murray State University in Idaho. And his research concerns stress, social support, and the role of technology in personal relationships, each of which is another reason he just made the absolute perfect discussion leader for this program at this time. He got his PhD in psychology from Kent State University. And if you don't mind a bit of a plea to close out the episode here, I'd say please let your friends in psychology and other related fields know that IHS is also concerned about their work, their careers, and their interactions with the larger community of classical liberals.

Anthony Comegna ([27:42](#)):

Psychology is admittedly one of our smaller pools amidst a sea of economics and political philosophers, but we very much plan on hosting many, many more programs on psychology in the coming years. Until then everyone, stay happy and healthy out there. After all, though it may not be a hard and fast rule, we all need to be taking great care of ourselves and one another if we want to keep the progress coming.