

# Hayek: Post-Atomic Liberal

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F. A. Hayek was probably the most important theorist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; yet his work was premised on a rejection of the rationalist trend of his lifetime. He wrote remarkably broadly across several disciplines (Caldwell, 2004a). His social theory harks back to the Scottish Enlightenment while his political views align with 19<sup>th</sup> century liberalism. His epistemology and ontology, however, have more in common with the post-modernism, systems theory and complexity theory of contemporary scholarship.

In what sense is Hayek an anti-rationalist? Hayek might appear moderate in the anti-rationalist tradition. He is not against the use but only the abuse of reason (Boettke, 2018). While more verbose than contemporary economists, he avoids emotive, affective rhetoric for abstract argument and technical analysis. His political theory includes a general commitment to the rule of law (at least with respect to any large-scale social order), voluntary contracting and private property. This limits space for local particularism. His chief intellectual opponents are not Kantians (from whom he draws some inspiration himself) but the constructivist rationalism of Russell, Wells, Saint-Simon and Comte who have few explicit supporters even among contemporary socialists (Friedman, 2005). His key political enemies are generally not piecemeal reformers but revolutionary socialists, authoritarian nationalists and central planners.

Although this view is defensible, in this chapter, I indicate some ways that Hayek's approach offers a deeper conceptual critique of rationalism than sometimes assumed. I begin with a sketch of the rationalist worldview and some critiques that bear a family resemblance to Hayek's. Then I outline Hayek's alternative vision through his psychology, epistemology and ontology, economic and social theory, and his politics. I end with some indications about where his paradigm is taking contemporary Hayekian research.

## **The rationalist worldview**

Let's begin with a slightly gross description of how the common-sense, practical, rationalist philosopher goes about fitting her normative theory to social reality. The origins of the standard

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view lie in the philosophic radicalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the birth of professional philosophy and economics among self-appointed destroyers of dogma and stale orthodoxy. On this account, there is a mind-independent universe composed of physical objects based on consistent laws of nature that become progressively more accessible to human understanding through scientific analysis. This is a deterministic universe of facts that corresponds with reasonable regularity to our experience and shared language, especially when we allow our fallible individual perceptions to be corrected as needed by the scientific method.

Some of these objects are bodies endowed with life, and the capacity to feel and act. While still subject to natural laws, these experiencing beings are the ultimate and only source of moral concern. Human agents are normally taken to be the most important sources of value either absolutely or to be generally prioritized because of their capacity for rational thought and moral agency. We impute value to objects in the physical universe based on the interests living beings have in them. As physical objects stand in deterministic relationship with each other, so do rational agents stand in a moral relationship with each other. A popular version of this relationship is 'equal status'. Moral agents have the capacity to do each other right and wrong. While debates rage within the rationalist tradition as to whether deontological, contractualist or consequentialist meta-ethics are better accounts on which to ground morality, they share this common notion that what matters is a distinct category of living subjects in an otherwise lifeless world.

Mediating the physical reality of objects and the reality of rational persons endowed with moral worth, there lies social reality: the norms and institutions through which persons interact. These social facts have their own generalization and logical structures, although they are blurrier and more contestable than facts of nature. Moral progress is found in the evaluation and reform of these social relationships so that they can better serve the fundamental interests of individuals. What rationalism offers is a distinct division of epistemic labor with natural scientists establishing the objective conditions within which society must operate, social scientists examining the outcomes of social arrangements and public policies, and ethicists evaluating the conduct of individuals and the overall aims of social institutions.

*Rationalism's discontents*

There is pushback against this account. Wittgenstein (1968) (incidentally Hayek's second cousin) showed that language cannot refer to discrete features of the world but only to family resemblances that are elaborated through language games. Catholic philosophers, such as Charles Taylor (1971) and Alasdair MacIntyre (2007), reject the idea that a science of human behavior can be modelled on natural science and try to locate value in organic, social practices and community relations rather than individual subjective experience. Judith Butler (2006) peels back the edges of social and naturalistic distinctions, particularly Beauvoir's binary between biological sex and socially constructed gender, to argue that common scientific understandings of biological distinctions do not follow naturally from neutral scientific analysis but are the result of social relations and power dynamics. Pragmatists and anti-foundationalists like Richard Rorty (1980) reject the fact/value distinction, proposing that all social scientific practices are value-laden.

Despite these criticisms and concerns, the rationalist worldview prevails because it is tractable for students and attractive to the class of intellectuals that wish to make a positive mark in the world of public affairs. It sets up an informal binary between an educated, progressive, scientifically-informed class of people active in public policy and the relatively less-informed masses who can be presumed to cling to various illusions and emotions. Nevertheless, on reflection, the rationalist worldview is rather odd. It asks us to imagine that reality is constituted by a disenchanted material world that contains within it pockets of fundamental normative significance, the most important contained within the skulls of a subset of living hominids. This is not exactly Cartesian dualism, but it looks suspiciously like a reduced form of it. What if it turned out these foundations were as arbitrary as discourses founded in mythology or theology?

Moreover, it is easy for the disenchantment inherent in the description of the supposed physical universe to spread and undermine the conceptual foundations of morality. The more deterministic explanation of human behavior we find and accept, the less responsibility, individuality and vitality we appear to be able to attribute to people. All individual attributes, habits and decisions seem ultimately subject to rational deterministic explanations founded in genetics, nurture and arbitrary external forces. Pushed to a logical conclusion, one struggles to identify what exactly is supposed to be special about human agency. In modern philosophy, free will appears more like an epiphonema or an illusion, leaving just our passive experiencing selves

as supposedly valuable sites of moral worth. With such tenuous metaphysical foundations tethering human values to supposed physical reality, it is unsurprising that some philosophers ultimately succumb to an empirical realism, hard determinism and moral relativism.

Curiously, the warrant for believing this worldview has been challenged by developments in quantum physics that suggest the search for observer-independent fundamental entities in nature may ultimately fail (d’Espagnat, 2011; Margenau, 1950). The observer, for the time being at least, is back in the model of fundamental physics. In the following, I try to show how Hayek’s skeptical perspective can cope with this apparent lack of foundations for our most basic beliefs.

### **The Hayekian Alternative**

While there are plenty of critics of the rationalist worldview, they have their own substantial flaws that amount to obscurantism: the sectarian religious foundations of the Catholic theorists and the genocidal anti-humanism of Heidegger and his remarkably many followers. The difference with Hayek is that he offers a way of fighting the monster of Rationalism while avoiding becoming an inscrutable monster oneself.

The crucial move, and in this he follows Hume (Livingston, 1991), is to recognize the non-rational origins of most social institutions, but treating this neither as grounds for dismissal of those institutions as unsound, nor an excuse to retreat from reason altogether. Indeed, reason itself has non-rational, emergent origins but is nevertheless a marvelous feature of humanity. Anti-rationalist themes that appear throughout Hayek’s work include: an emphasis on learning by processes of discovery, trial and error, feedback and adaptation rather than knowing by abstract theorizing; and the notion that the internal processes by which we come to a particular belief or decision is more complex than either a scientific experimenter nor our own selves in introspection can know. We are always, on some level, a mystery even to ourselves.

### *Psychology*

A key to understanding Hayek’s perspective lies in *The Sensory Order* (1952) and *The Counter-Revolution of Science* (1979). Published in the middle of Hayek’s life, they critique the possibility of a direct parallel between a physical stimulus and a state of consciousness. This assumption lies at the core of the psychological school of behaviorism, a positivist doctrine that insists that only directly observable phenomena are capable of systematic analysis, and that the

only features of psychology that can be studied are external stimuli and human responses. This was the foundations of *Scientism* that enables social scientists and philosophers to claim that they can reform society based on provable scientific laws (Caldwell, 2004b: 245).

The behaviorist mistake is assuming that human perception can be treated as if it was made up of simple experiences that can be identified as primitive sense-data to be deployed experimentally: for example, the experience of seeing a red dot. Hayek's argument was that even the most apparently simple concepts as 'red' and 'dot' are not really primitives that pop into one's brain as a result of initial perception, but rely on categories hewn through memory, childhood training, education and ultimately shared language. The growing, learning mind takes the unpredictable, holistic, multi-sensory stream of experience and incrementally separates it into cognizable patterns that allow us to impose some order and predictability on sensation (Fuster, 2011). People's responses to stimuli are mediated by the coincidence of other stimuli (no stimulus is ever present in total isolation), their previous patterns of experience and their approach to categorization. Because of the adaptive, experiential origins of these categories, they are open to revision should the predictiveness of existing patterns break down. They do not correspond to objective, mind-independent facts.

### *Epistemology and ontology*

The implications of this critique are substantial for epistemology more generally. It implies that we can only apprehend the world through the imposition of theoretical categories. This radicalizes the position of Hayek's intellectual forebears in the Scottish Enlightenment. Adam Smith (1982) used the development of scientific astronomy to consider the moral implications of humanity not being physically at the center of the universe (Paganelli, 2017). In doing so, he showed that everyday morality, as essential as it was for social coordination, was grounded in sentiments (equivalent almost to an aesthetic sense) that were subject to subjective distortions and could not be expected to reflect an underlying moral relationship.

Hayek's contribution is more fundamental, showing that our everyday sensory perception is deeply rooted in our collective and individual adaptations as embodied beings. Our entire sensory experience is constitutively tuned to pick out what our experience thus far has found to be relevant features of the world, presumably including features that make us better fit for individual and communal survival. Our models of the world are functional for certain purposes,

but we have no warrant to believe the patterns and categories that make up our shared human world reflect a fundamental mind-independent universe. Even our category of the physical itself is the result of intersubjective engagement rather than identifying an objective world with clarity and certainty.

From this austere standpoint, what can sensibly be discovered and known? For this, Hayek believes that we can leverage our capacity for pattern recognition. While we cannot ever have true knowledge of physical objects, or their constitutive elements, we can gain substantial knowledge about the structure of phenomena that we experience and perceive. We can come to understand temporal orderings, one phenomenon following another, as well as structural orders, the way that certain elements of our experience must be in place together in a pattern to produce another phenomenon. In one later paper, Hayek (1981) makes a helpful distinction between concrete and abstract orders. Concrete orders are the ones we experience and encounter, while abstract orders are the categories and models that we develop that help us make sense of these encounters. A necessary feature of concrete orders is they always have more dimensions and features to them that we have not apprehended. They are irreducibly complex. Abstract orders, by contrast, are the simplified models and categories that we use to make sense of our experience and communications with others.

We can explain this distinction with a suitably mundane example. We feel like we have a firm idea of a blade of grass, certainly enough to spot one adequately in the contexts in which we are likely to find one, whether it is in a field or crumpled in our hair after a picnic. Nevertheless, we may not so easily recognize grass in an unfamiliar context such as in a soup. Unless we have botanic expertise, we will struggle to differentiate a sedge or rush stem from a blade of grass. Each blade has different dimensions, shapes and colors and each structure is unique on cursory inspection and more radically so if we cared to look at the cellular structure. Even the most accomplished botanist cannot grasp actual knowledge of even one blade because it is irreducibly complex. Our firm idea is an abstract order of various phenomena that are ordinarily adequate to recognize grass for our purposes. Grass is not a real object but an intersubjectively determined category that indicates certain phenomena.

This has implications for the sort of deliberate interventions we can make too. We can cultivate a lawn in the sense that we can learn how to order the basic conditions that will allow a order that

has the patters of our category of lawn to grow. What we cannot do is determine the precise arrangement of the blades of grass constituting the lawn nor construct a single blade of grass up according to a precise specification.

Departing from Cartesian assumptions of atomistic individualism (Machan, 2000), this account can seem solipsistic. The mind's eye seems to be a narrow slit through which shadows of an external world make shallow, distorted impressions on a remote psyche. But this is not the implication once we dispose of the of the supposedly foundational subject/object distinction. We can recognize subjecthood as an abstract category, a product of a philosophy laden with abstruse theological baggage. The category is no more real than the blades of grass but a perspective that happens to come to mind more easily in a philosophy seminar. During most of our everyday experience, when we are not primed to be so self-conscious and self-centered, the phenomenal experience of ourselves and the environment is more continuous, flowing and irreducibly social in the sense that the categories that we use for interacting with the world are constituted and remade through interactions with many other minds.

### *Economic and Social theory*

What does this skeptical standpoint mean for understanding human society? Like concrete orders more generally, human social arrangements and practices are irreducibly complex, impossible for any individual to comprehend in detail. What makes them interesting is that they are constituted by the physically unconstrained activities of human beings but nevertheless take on the form of systematic orderliness. Both the rationalist and the social critic alike observe such orderliness and structure and presume that society persists, both for better and for worse, through the exercise of force, legal authority and other more subtle forms of power and ideological influence.

Hayek offers an alternative account, again drawing on insights from the Scottish Enlightenment. Most features of society are spontaneous orders: social institutions and structures that are the result of human action but not of design. The origins of all these institutions (including language, property, law and money) have all developed piecemeal through individuals attempting to cooperate to solve various practical problems. These unintentionally generate more systematic patterns of conduct that are accepted initially because they solve coordination problems and thereafter because they become part of the background moral and practical understandings of the

people participating in them. A consequence of this account, like the lawn example, is that it is impossible to construct such complex orders through rational design. The most that a human agent can influence are some of the background conditions that make a pattern of such an order more likely to emerge.

These various institutions combine to create an environment in which individuals can make use of knowledge that they do not personally possess (Hayek, 1945). These institutions harness human capacity to recognize and follow patterns of behavior to create a social order that expands the scale, scope and complexity of cooperation among people who may otherwise be operating with profoundly different categorical models of the world. These institutions include language but also more specifically classical liberal elements such as alienable property, voluntary contract and the price system (Hayek, 1973).

Property rights impose negative duties not to use a resource or interfere with a bounded environment. This gives property owners the capacity to work, manage, reconfigure and develop property for their own use. With immunity from arbitrary seizure, the owner can specialize in getting the most out of the environment over which they have exclusive control. This specialization can take the form of traditional knowledge and practical know-how as well as trial and error with feedback generated by the owner bearing the costs of failure. Alienable property allows for it to be exchanged, sub-divided or merged, allowing those most able to make use of an area or resource to come into its legal possession. The addition of voluntary contracting allows exchanges of property, goods and services to be made over distance and time. One way of looking at this is to say that property and contract institutions take the daunting complexity of the world and divide it up into modules for which people can sensibly take responsibility using the various categories of thought they have available to them.

For successful cooperation across a whole community, a society needs, in addition, an open-ended scheme of market exchange with a price system. Prices play two main roles in Hayek's framework. The first is discernible within the more mainstream neoclassical economic model. They are public announcements of the going rate for goods and services, and especially standardized commodities across an economy. This is what allows consumers and producers operating within their own sphere of responsibility to appropriate resources produced elsewhere while economizing based on the knowledge of scarcities as embedded in prices. The second is as



signals of potential profit opportunities. Producers do not have to treat prices as given but as standards that can be surpassed if they can figure out a way of acting more efficiently or creatively, often by utilizing local or tacit, knowledge that other market participants do not have (Kirzner, 1997; Lavoie, 1986).

Allowing the pursuit of profit opportunities has a familiar incentive role. However, the fundamental role of realization of profit and loss is to provide practical feedback that causes patterns of conduct that effectively supplies the ends of others to expand and be imitated while causing others to shrink and stop. The trappings of rationality (such as foresight, alertness and prudence) certainly help individual ventures to succeed but the process is ultimately evolutionary: trial, error, selection and filtering. The result is that from remarkably irrational starting assumptions, patterns of conduct that look as if they were designed for their purposes can emerge (Smith, 2003). In fact, they are far too complex, adapted and orderly for any actual rational agent to have successfully implemented.

Contemporary economic research often treats the core puzzle to be ‘given human beings are fundamentally rational, why do so many act so dumb?’ The natural implication, once answered, is that a great deal of human conduct benefits from discretionary correction to make it more appropriately rational (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). The Hayekian standpoint inverts the puzzle (Boettke et al., 2013). It asks, ‘given overwhelming limits to individual rationality and knowledge, why is it that humans can end up acting *as if* they are so smart?’ It is the marvel of widespread social cooperation one sees in a peaceful civil society that requires explanation, not the individual mistakes and deviances within it. Hence from a condition of profound ignorance and very limited rationality a spontaneous order based on cooperation and free exchange, what Hayek calls *catallaxy*, emerges.

### *Political and legal theory*

From these theoretical foundations emerge Hayek’s controversial political theory and praxis. His most popular book, *The Road to Serfdom* (2007), was a warning in the aftermath of World War II that the Western world could slide into Soviet-style authoritarianism through the introduction of a planned economy within a formal democracy. What distinguished Hayek’s argument was his reliance on the epistemic limits of democratic institutions rather than the typical conservative fear that the voting masses will simply vote to expropriate the wealthy, leading to poverty once

people stop producing in the absence of incentives. Hayek argues that the nature of tacit knowledge means that a great deal of relevant information cannot be utilized through anything other than a market process. Hence, the replacement of market processes even with democratically accountable state-run economies will rapidly disappoint and impoverish citizens even in the ideal scenario where politicians and administrators act purely on benevolence. Citizens will be faced with a difficult choice of returning to the apparent disorder and uncertainty of markets and private property; or putting their faith in an economic dictator. Only at this point would the more unscrupulous individuals rise to the top as leaders as only most deceitful would be willing to promise prosperity for all just so long as they were handed more personal power.

Hayek's strident critiques of the very notion of social justice kept him on the periphery of political philosophy (Hayek, 1976; Lister, 2013; Tebble, 2009). Nevertheless, Hayek's (1960, 1976) description of the rule of law, freedom from arbitrary commands, penetrated mainstream legal theory and his account is often treated as compelling enough to be included as canon (Raz, 1979). Nevertheless, most liberals tend to see the rule of law as one important political value among several others, with the likelihood that it may frequently have to play second fiddle to the substantive aims of the state such as the pursuit of equality or welfare. Liberals see Hayek as too concerned with legal formalities rather than real interests. From their perspective, the rule of law is an important constraint on state power but that tying the hands of the state can equally threaten individual interests in other ways, so it is a matter of judgement and discretion when the rule of law should be privileged.

This misses Hayek's distinctively epistemic basis for the rule of law and the context of the more substantive aims of his liberal order. The rule of law is not merely a formal constraint on state action but an objective to achieve a state of civil society where there is a large private sphere where people can act on the basis of their own ends rather than on the basis of the arbitrary decisions of others. While these conditions are subjectively pleasant, at least for people who dislike coercion in private life, what is more significant is that it is only in these conditions where the spontaneous experimentation, competition and imitation of catallaxy persists. Without this sphere, cooperation at the scale of a society breaks down altogether.

## **Legacy and future**

What is the practical legacy of Hayek's critique of rationalism? In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hayek's views made him a decisively 'rightwing' figure. He was a cold-war liberal implacably opposed to the Soviet Union who inspired Margaret Thatcher's free-market reforms in the United Kingdom and defended Pinochet's violent coup against a democratic socialist government in Chile (Caldwell and Montes, 2015). But history shows that political categories are subject to revision. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the political spectrum aligned on the issue of the state management of the economy with the right taking the broadly anti-statist side. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the big divide may turn out to be between a statist nationalism (more easily associated with the right) and an open-ended cosmopolitanism. In this context, Hayek's anti-nationalism, more than his anti-socialism, may come to be more salient (Trantidis and Cowen, 2019). Hayek's skepticism of applying rigid categories to concrete situations is more compatible with shifting plural identities of an open-ended society (with permeable borders) than one predicated on abstract identities.

Although Hayekian insights resist formalization, Levy (2002) helps cast light on the link between Hayek's epistemology and political economy by comparing robust statistics to robust institutions. Robust statistics sacrifice the precision of statistical estimates in order to reduce the scope for error based on mistaken model assumptions. Similarly, robust institutions sacrifice the capacity to make optimal decisions in individual cases in order to minimize costly errors across many cases. Preferring robust analyses and decision processes at the expense of pin-point accuracy reflects Hayekian skepticism of both abstract assumptions and empirical data that go into a model. If data is always tentative and subject to revision, then a process that relies as little as possible on accurate inputs is less likely to steer us wrong. Levy's approach has helped to inspire the *robust political economy* research agenda, the comparative analysis of institutions on the basis of their capacity to deal with knowledge and incentive problems (Boettke and Leeson, 2004; Cowen, 2017; Pennington, 2011).

In political philosophy, Gerald Gaus (2012, 2017; cf. Gaus and Hankins, 2017) is the most prominent contemporary developer of Hayekian ideas. Compared to his peers in the discipline, Gaus emphasizes the risks, more so than the opportunities, of attempting to implement utopian social theories based on abstract models, the different moral cognitive styles between individuals within the same communities. Without denying a role for evaluative judgements, this mode of theorizing is more comfortable with the deep diversity of moral frameworks and the complex

cultural adaptations that one sees in the variety of human societies. Following the tolerant Kukathas (2003), Gaus's approach is less parochial than either contemporary applied ethics or other pragmatist schools of political philosophy. This is a promising research agenda for a political morality suitable for a globalized world where remarkably different cultures and mores are expected to find ways of peacefully cooperating.

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