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**HAYEK AND THE “USE OF KNOWLEDGE IN SOCIETY”**

This entry explicates Hayek’s social epistemology, an epistemology that gives due consideration to both the workings of the individual mind *and* the mechanics of the ambient sociality in which mind is enmeshed. On Hayek’s account, mind and sociality are coevolved connectionist-like systems, the latter scaffolding the inherently constrained mind, thereby significantly reducing the epistemic transaction costs involved in the harvesting of knowledge.

**Hayek’s Basic Insight**

Hayek’s most abiding philosophical insight is the idea that “perfect” knowledge is unnecessary, impracticable, irrelevant and, indeed for these very reasons, its indiscriminating pursuit can be pernicious. Hayek’s specific targets were two species of “rationalism”: central planning (favored by collectivism) and the abstract individualism of *homo economicus* (favored by orthodox economics). According to Hayek, these rationalisms fail miserably to appreciate that cultural complexity offers both the *fabric of possibility* and of *inherent constraint*. If one understands sociality to be a complex and necessarily

*dynamic* weave of innumerable “spontaneous orders,” then on Hayek’s account, knowledge, paradoxically, can become *less* incomplete only if it becomes *more* dispersed.

Hayek’s social epistemology is spread across his work and is not coextensive with the essay “The Use of Knowledge in Society” that appears in this entry’s title. Hayek’s core presupposition – that mind is subject to terminal cognitive and epistemological constraint – crucially informs his social epistemology, philosophy of social science and social theory. Indeed, Hayek made a very distinctive link between mind and freedom: all institutions of freedom are essentially adaptations to the fundamental fact of cognitive constraint. Hayek’s philosophical psychology is set out in its most extended and technical form in the much-neglected *The Sensory Order* but its concerns are to be found in attenuated form throughout his substantial corpus.

### **Cognition and Sociality**

“Cognitive constraint” connotes the idea that the human mind is terminally subject to cognitive and epistemological opaqueness, not only concerning its own mechanics (the mind-body problem) but also in terms of collective intentionality. The *fundamentum* and the *residua* of practical reasoning of multitudes condense into customs, practices and traditions,

entailing that mind is inescapably culturally saturated: knowledge is modulated and particularized. Cognition, is therefore, always epistemically perspectival despite a universally shared cognitive architecture. In order to “harvest” knowledge, Hayek postulates a *dynamic* connectionist-like theory of mind (the nervous system characteristically being a universal pattern-seeking mechanism).

In many respects, for Hayek, mind is the analog of his connectionist-like theory of sociality: that is, both mind and sociality are conceived as classic instantiations of mutually *coevolved* spontaneous orders. This idea is absolutely critical to understanding Hayek. In much the same way that synapses are strengthened while unused linkages weaken and wither away, so too are paths to salient social knowledge strengthened or weakened – “*social connectionism*,” if you will.

### **Action and Social Knowledge**

As a guide to action, social knowledge (know-how) cannot be reduced, abridged, or restated propositionally (as knowledge-that) without remainder. It is for this reason that the demand for a demonstrative and deliberate use of *reason* in matters of sociality will defeat the cognitive capacity of any one individual or too heterogeneous a group of individuals. Hayek at different times of his career variously attributed this inappropriate rationalism to certain

economists, central planners, “scientific” social theorists, and ideologues of both the Left and the Right. That knowledge cannot be aggregated, centralized or otherwise fully harvested, is in Hayek’s view, a misplaced pessimism. On the contrary, this state of affairs facilitates “computational” and cognitive efficiencies by enabling individuals to exploit environmental and social resources rather than having to encode everything relevant within the confines of the brain. It is this “situated” perspective that motivates Hayek’s social externalism. For Hayek, this is the mark of advanced cognition – humankind’s evolutionary propensity to diffuse propositional and practical knowledge or wisdom through external epistemic structures.

### **Communicative Systems of Knowledge**

For Hayek the conditions for epistemic veracity are best fostered through the manifold of *spontaneous orders* or “communications systems” that comprise the fabric of the civil (liberal) condition. Hayek was centrally concerned with the *communicative* aspect to knowledge – the acquisition, mediation, and transmission of (for the most part third-party) knowledge in complex communities of knowers. A healthily functioning communications mechanism promotes computational efficiencies, a coordination mechanism for diverse wants, preferences and interests. It should be noted that at no time did Hayek

give ontological priority to the market (attributions of economism to Hayek are thoroughly misplaced). Whatever the market's epistemic strengths (and they are considerable), for Hayek the healthy functioning of a market presupposes other institutions and spontaneous orders. Indeed, a manifold network of spontaneous orders (science and democracy being two other prominent orders) best promotes the conditions for moral and political freedom or autonomy. No one order should subsume or impinge upon another: the exercise of epistemic immodesty within and between orders is bound to impoverish the liberal condition. It is the *sine qua non* of the liberal condition that there will always be inherent tensions – to make one order answerable to another order's metric is both rationalistic and indeed, anti-liberal.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Hayek's intellectual fortunes have ebbed and flowed: his popularity with the public counterposed by his lack of popularity within the academy, his reputation being tarnished from having been sequestered by- and consequently unfairly associated with- the *laissez-faire* community. Hayek's appeal is now significantly broader and his prescience in matters epistemological and in the philosophy of mind now much more richly appreciated. The lived subjectivity emphasized by the Austrian tradition, the Scottish Enlightenment emphasis on

emergent properties, the “situated” non-Cartesian wing of cognitive science, analytical social epistemology and network theory – all find confluence of interest in Hayek’s work. If there were a slogan that captures Hayek’s lifelong project it is that Hayek *socializes the mind* and “*cognitivizes*” *social theory*.

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See also Austrian Economics, Complexity and the Social Sciences, Cooperation, Distributed Cognition and Extended Mind Theory, Invisible Hand Explanations, Scottish Enlightenment: Influence on Social Sciences, Situated Cognition, Spontaneous Order, Tacit Knowledge.

## **FURTHER READINGS**

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