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Tracks in the Woods

F.A. Hayek's Philosophy of History

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In the following pages I should like to expound what I take to be the 'philosophy of history' present in the work of the late Friedrich August von Hayek. This is, of course, a considerable task for a paper of this size and I would therefore like to limit the discussion to an analysis of Professor Hayek's highly celebrated two-part essay "Scientism and the Study of Society" (latter reproduced in *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason*). The singling out of this work in particular is not an arbitrary decision. Rather I believe this to be a work which quite readily lends its voice, so to speak, to a conversation which is decidedly philosophical in nature. That is to say that I take Professor Hayek to be making certain philosophical claims in this work which, once clarified, provide important answers to certain puzzles which have occupied scholars of the philosophy of history. It is in the clarification of Hayek's claims that I find the primary task of this paper. However, before we attempt this it is necessary to review, in general terms, what constitutes a 'philosophy of history'. Specifically, we should aim to determine the problems or questions associated with this branch of philosophy.

The structure of this paper will therefore proceed as follows. I will begin, as promised, with a brief survey of the central issues in the philosophy of history. I will attempt to limit this review to issues pertinent to our discussion of Hayek, namely, those which address (1) questions of metaphysics (i.e. what is the nature of the reality of historical structures and phenomena?) as well as (2) questions of epistemology (i.e. what sort of historiographies are we justified in composing? What can we know about that past?). With these questions in mind we will then proceed to the primary task of this paper which is to clarify Hayek's answers to these questions. Regarding the first, Hayek subscribes to a kind of historical atomism whereby historical processes exist solely in the summation of the actions of individuals. Regarding the second, Hayek clearly privileges the subjective experience of the historical actor going so far as to

suggest that an aim to understand such subjective entities as 'intention' constitutes the principal difference in methodology between the social and physical sciences.

I

In the broadest sense, the philosophy of history consists, quite simply, in the treatment both of the study of history as well as history itself using philosophical concepts, analysis and procedures.[1] Indeed, contributions to the body of work grouped under the heading 'philosophy of history' have come from a variety of schools of thought (positivist, idealist, Marxist, empiricist) and disciplines both within and without philosophy (history, logic, theology, hermeneutics, literary criticism). Further, it would be misleading to speak of a philosophical tradition (in the sense of an ongoing and developing conversation) since representatives of the various approaches rarely seem to be in direct dialogue with each other.[2] Nonetheless there are certain problems or puzzles which are peculiar to the philosophy of history of which two will be addressed in this paper. The answers to both questions have been diverse. The first concerns the nature or substance of historical entities. In other words, we would like to know what kind of thing, for example, the French Revolution or the Spanish Inquisition is. These are historical events and historical objects respectively and answers abound as to their substance. Hegel would perhaps refer to the thesis and the antithesis with respect to the French Revolution whereas Marx might invoke the class struggle to explain the terror of the Inquisition. Both of these accounts are underpinned by certain philosophical assumptions. They explain historical phenomena using the tools of philosophy. Another such problem has to do with our relationship to the past. In other words, what questions may be put to history? What are the limits of our knowledge of the past? What sort of things can and should the historian observe in order to write an epistemically justified historiography? It remains the task of this paper to pose these questions to Professor Hayek. We will begin by elucidating the theoretical steps in Hayek's argument.

II

It should be noted that in the essay with which we will deal, Hayek makes no claim to be providing a 'philosophy of history' *per se*. While there are definitely positive claims made in the first half of the essay, it is primarily a polemic against what he refers to as the "scientistic prejudice" which, for Hayek, "involves a mechanical and uncritical application of habits of thought [associated with the physical sciences] to fields different from those in which they have been formed", namely, the social sciences (including the field of historical inquiry).[3] Thus, in the discussion to follow it should be noted that Hayek clearly distinguishes between the legitimate

[1] Daniel Little, "Philosophy of History", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2007 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2007/entries/history/.
[2] Ibid.
[3] F.A. Hayek, "Scientism and the Study of Society," *Economica*, 9, no. 35 (1942), p. 269.

practice of modern science and *scientism*. The latter implies a slavish devotion to the so-called scientific method and, according to Hayek, "is not an unprejudiced but a very prejudiced approach which, before it has considered its subject, claims to know what is the most appropriate way of investigating it."[4] Thus, ours is not a straightforward task, for we are charged to distill positive claims from negative criticisms and a philosophy of history from a document not obviously connected with this branch of philosophy. Nonetheless, this should not give us pause for the claims, however elaborated, are present. We will begin with our first question raised by the methodological approach. Specifically, how does Hayek understand the nature of historical entities?

According to Hayek, the primary task of modern science is to re-orientate our classifications of events in the external world away from those formed on the basis of our ordinary experience and toward those based on systematic test and experimentation and which could conform to a general rule.[5] In other words, we, as human beings begin by observing events in the external world as being similar to or different from each other. We then make the mistake of supposing that this similarity or difference extends to aspects of the event which we have not observed. However this is frequently shown to be false and it is therefore the task of science to debunk these classificatory systems and replace them with those which would stand up to systematic testing.[6] For example, an apple picked from a tree and an apple composed of wax would appear to the eye as a similar sort of thing. However, that this classification is a mistaken one is quickly discovered should one attempt to consume a wax apple. In this case, it is the task of science to re-organize our classification of these objects into the categories "fruit" and "wax facsimiles of fruit" based on the tested behaviour and physical composition of these objects (as opposed to how they appear to our senses). Thus, for the modern scientist

> "…[t]he concepts which men actually employ, the way in which they see nature, is to the scientist necessarily a provisional affair and his task is to change this picture, to change the concepts in use so as to make more definite and certain our statements about the new classes of events."[7]

This approach could be applied not merely to objects but to *events* in the external world as well. Our means of classifying the behaviour of animals, for example, has been radically transformed by the methods and aims of modern science.

Hayek argues, however, that a grave error is committed when this way of thinking is applied to social phenomena as well. The misapplication begins when social scientists of a

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., p. 271.
[6] Ibid., p. 272.
[7] Ibid., p. 275.

'scientistic' mindset (remembering Hayek's definition of this term) substitute social phenomena, entities such as "society" or "class" or historical entities such as "French Revolution" or "the Middle Ages", for observable objects in the physical world.[8] According to Hayek, the scientist approach "treats social phenomena not as something of which the human mind is apart and the principles of whose organisation we can reconstruct from the familiar parts, but as if they were objects directly perceived by us as wholes."[9] In other words, these social scientists suppose that such entities can be observed and systematically tested to determine the *laws by which they are governed* in much the same way as physical objects and events. This is the so-called "objectivism" of the scientistic approach with which Hayek takes issue.

Hayek goes on to argue that this methodology reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of social phenomena. In fact, the scientist has the whole thing backward right from the start. Regarding August Comte's contention that the social sciences, like the biological sciences should begin be observing the better known "whole object" (e.g. "The French Revolution") as opposed to the constituent parts (e.g. the actions of Louis XVI) Hayek writes that, while we may be justified in beginning from an observable whole in the biological sciences, in the social sciences

> "…it is not the observation of the regular coexistence of certain physical facts which treaches us that they belong together or form a whole. We do not first observe that the pasts always occur together and afterwards ask what holds then together; but it is only because we know the ties that hold them toether that we can select a few elements from the immensely complicated world around us as parts of a connected whole."[10]

Thus, it is in fact the constituent elements and not the whole objects which are prior. We here have the makings of an answer to our first question. Hayek, it seems, understands the nature of historical entities to consist as a kind of alloy, a rough conglomeration of elements. We should be careful, however, not to misunderstand Hayek in supposing that he merely wishes to demonstrate that historical entities *contain* individual elements. This would seem a rather trivial point. In fact, I would argue that Hayek is here arguing something much more fundamental. At one point he describes the "concrete knowledge which guides the action of any group of people" or, in other words, those elusive social bodies or categories such as 'language' or 'culture' (terms of high importance to the historian). He writes of this concrete knowledge that it exists not as a consistent and coherent body but only "in the dispersed, incomplete, and inconsistent form in which it appears in many individual minds."[11] Furthermore, "this dispersion and imperfection of

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[8] F.A. Hayek, "Scientism and the Study of Society," *Economica*, 10, no. 37 (1943), p. 41.
[9] Ibid., p. 42.
[10] Ibid., p. 46.
[11] Hayek, 1942, p. 280.

all knowledge is one of the basic facts from which the social sciences have to start."[12] Thus, social phenomena are fractured, disjointed and spontaneous by their very nature. Any move to objectify, stabilize or collectivize these phenomena is an artificial (and, as Hayek would argue) unacceptable one. To explain how what we call social phenomena appear out of interacting individual elements, Hayek asks us to imagine the way in which human tracks and paths are formed in the wild. The first navigator traverses the country choosing, once must assume, the path of least resistance, the best possible pathway. But, of course, the path already chosen makes it more likely that it is the easiest path and so more and more navigators will choose the existing paths.[13] Thus, "[h]uman movements through the district come to conform to a definite pattern which, although the result of deliberate decisions of many people, has yet not been consciously designed by anyone."[14] It is my contention that we can place historical entities in this group as well. Consider the French Revolution. There are, as we determined at the start of this paper, a variety of ways to understand this historical event. We may use Marxist language and refer to it as an instantiation of the interminable 'class struggle'. Or, we may refer to socio-economic conditions which preceded 1789 and sight these as determining factors in the events of that year. However, if we apply Professor Hayek's thinking to this problem we should be forced to conclude that socio-economic factors ("poverty" or "nationalism") do not cause anything, they are, in fact, merely names we have for the spontaneous order which results from individual actions. It is a particular 'set of tracks in the woods' which we then are able to identify as social phenomena only after observing its order. In sum, historical events could be said to reveal themselves as spontaneously ordered patterns of individual elements. We have here a broad idea of how Hayek understands the nature and substance of historical events.

III

This is, however, only one half of his argument. He goes on to discuss the necessary role of the social scientist in relation to her data (our second question). He argues that we *must* begin with the elements when studying social phenomena because, as human beings, we are unable to extricate ourselves from those social phenomena which we study. In other words, it is impossible to provide what Hayek calls a "macrodynamic theory" (under which most broad historiographies could be classified) which "dispenses with our knowledge of what things *mean* to the acting men…"[15] It is only because the social scientist assumes a degree of basic continuity of knowledge and experience with her subject that the social phenomena with which she deals can be rendered coherent. The "behaviour" of social phenomena, in other words, cannot be objectively observed like physical objects because the relationship between the observer and the observed is fundamentally different in these two cases. We are only able to *understand* social

[12] Ibid., p. 280.
[13] Ibid., p. 289.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Hayek, 1943, p. 47.

phenomena because we understand, at a very basic level, the thought processes of those individuals which make up these phenomena.[16] Rather than dealing with objective, collective entities which can be isolated and therefore observed in order to analyze and predict their behaviour, social scientists, according to Hayek are *fully implicated* in their subject. Indeed, they "deal with phenomena which can be understood only because the object of [their] study has a mind of a structure similar to our own."[17]

To clarify this point, let us recall the 'tracks in the woods' example. It could be argued that this paradigm introduces nothing new to our understanding. It is an obvious and trivial point that paths in the forest will develop this way, with each individual choosing the path of least resistance and with certain paths making more sense than others and with a general pattern eventually developing. But this is exactly Hayek's point. This explanation appears salient only because we, as elements within these patterns, understand how individuals make these kinds of decisions (because, of course, we are constantly making similar ones ourselves). Furthermore, we are actually limited in our understanding of social phenomena for the same reason, namely, because our knowledge is limited to our experience of individual action.[18] It is as if, to use Hayek's example, a physicist were to attempt to construct a theory regarding the interaction of complex phenomena (the growth of a cell, for example) on the basis of only the knowledge of the inside of an atom and some limited experience of a few interacting atoms.[19] In sum, the conclusions of social science are deduced on the basis of knowledge only of individual elements within the social scheme. We must say, if we agree with Hayek, that our knowledge of historical entities must necessarily begin with the smallest elements, only afterward tentatively proceeding to discuss the spontaneous order produced by their interaction.

IV

It seems then that Hayek has been able to successfully answer both of the questions which we put to his material. He can therefore be said to have provided us with a coherent and attractive philosophy of history despite his never explicitly applying these principles neither to any historical period nor to any particular field within historical studies. We should therefore conclude by reviewing the steps in Hayek's argument.

First, Hayek is clearly arguing against a certain way of conducting historical inquiry, a certain philosophy of social science (and history in particular) which he calls 'scientism'. Scientism is the application of the methods and philosophical assumptions of modern science to problems of social science, for example, historical studies. One of the aims of modern science is

[16] Ibid., p. 48.
[17] Hayek, 1942, p. 279.
[18] Ibid., p. 290.
[19] Ibid.

to rearrange the way we classify physical objects and events in the world such that the behaviour of these objects and events can be regularly predicted according to ‘laws of nature’ (as opposed to the inconsistencies produced by mere sensory observation). The methods and philosophical assumptions inherent in this approach are incoherent in the social sciences according to Hayek. It is at this point (namely, where Hayek provides reason for condemning scientism in the social sciences) where I have attempted to demonstrate his philosophy of history. We required that he be able to answer two pertinent questions in the philosophy of history. First, he should be able to provide an account of the nature or substance of social phenomena or, more specifically, he should be able to tell us what kind of thing a historical event is. Secondly, he should be able to provide us what a general account of the historian’s epistemic relationship to the past (in other words, the kinds of histories we are epistemically justified in writing). In answer to the first, Hayek supposed that historical events such as the French Revolution were not, as the scientistic approach would have it, observable, objective, coherent wholes. Rather, social phenomena only present themselves through their constituent parts. They are contingent and spontaneous orders which arise from the interactions between individuals. From these relationships we are able to develop sophisticated concepts. In answer to the second, Hayek supposed that the social scientist, the historian in particular, shares a relationship to her field of study unlike that of the scientist his. The social scientist is only able to make sense, to understand, social phenomena because the individuals which make up the historical phenomena are assumed, on a very basic level, to function and behave in a predictable way. That is to say that the historian is epistemically justified in writing those histories which take seriously individual intention and which do not obscure such intention by involving some kind of objective social ‘force’.

On the basis of these findings, I would like to submit that Professor Hayek does, indeed, make a thoughtful and significant contribution to the tradition of philosophy of history. Furthermore, I believe that the depth of his work compels us to investigate further the catalogue of his writing so that we may be able to benefit from his insight as we approach new and unprecedented problems in philosophy.