

## Hayek on Spontaneous Orders and on Education

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Hayek wrote a lot about spontaneous orders, and a little about higher education. This paper will summarize what he had to say.

The best summary of Hayek's ideas on spontaneous orders is his seldom-cited piece, "Notes on the Evolution of Systems of Rules of Conduct: The Interplay between Rules of Individual Conduct and the Social Order of Actions" (Hayek 1967). Hayek begins by noting that he will use "the pair of concepts 'order and its elements' and 'groups and individuals' inter-changeably", thereby emphasizing that orders occur everywhere, not just in human societies (*ibid.*, p. 66). He then lays out various links between complex spontaneously-forming orders, evolution, and rule-following behavior. A thumbnail sketch might read as follows:<sup>1</sup>

1. Orders of various sorts exist in nature. An order occurs when the actions of various elements or members of a group are coordinated or brought into mutual adjustment.
2. Sometimes orders occur without anyone consciously designing them. Such spontaneous orders come into being as the result of the individual elements following rules, rules that do not aim at creating the resulting order as a goal.
3. We can say a number of things about the rules that can generate spontaneous orders:
  - a. Rules are often simple, and often take the form of prohibitions.
  - b. Individuals, even when they are capable of speech, need not know that they *are* following rules, or even if they do, need not be able to *articulate* the rules.
  - c. Individuals often cannot say *why* they are following the rules that they do, nor can they see what the actual *results* of the rules are.
  - d. Not all rules lead to order, and among those that may lead to an order in a given environment, their ability to do so may change as the environment changes. In fleshing this out, Hayek introduces the notion of emergent phenomena.<sup>2</sup>
4. Given what has been said about rules, it should be evident that typically they are not consciously selected by individuals aiming at an order. Rather, rules persist when the groups in which they are practiced persist.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The summary draws directly on a similar one found in Caldwell (2004), pp. 309-310.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Hayek 1967, p.71: "A change of environment may require, if the whole is to persist, a change in the order of the group and therefore in the rules of conduct of the individuals; and a spontaneous change of the rules of individual conduct and of the resulting order may enable the group to persist in circumstances which, without such change, would have led to its destruction."

5. The past history of a group, which includes the environments it faced in the past and its past rules, determine what rules will be followed in the present and the corresponding nature of the order.
6. Orders vary in complexity. Social orders are among the most complex: “Societies differ from simpler complex structures by the fact that their elements are themselves complex structures whose chance to persist depends on (or at least is improved by) their being part of the more comprehensive structure” (ibid., p. 76).
7. When dealing with complex orders, often the best we can do is to provide an “explanation of the principle” by which they operate. Precise predictions will not be possible; only “pattern predictions” about the range of phenomena to expect will be available.
8. As such, the theories we develop to explain complex orders will forbid fewer events, and thus will be less falsifiable, than those that deal with simple phenomena. As Hayek put it in “The Theory of Complex Phenomena,” this creates a dichotomy among the sciences:

The advance of science will thus have to proceed in two different directions: while it is certainly desirable to make our theories as falsifiable as possible, we must also push forward into fields where, as we advance, the degree of falsifiability necessarily decreases. This is the price we have to pay for an advance into the field of complex phenomena (Hayek [1964] 1967, p. 29).

Hayek wrote little on higher education. The most sustained reference is the final chapter of *The Constitution of Liberty* (Hayek [1960] 2011), which is titled “Education and Research.”

The first part of the chapter deals with education in general, and in particular with certain fundamental questions. He argues that the case is “very strong” that parents in a modern society be required to provide some minimum level of education for their children, especially if it is a democracy. The questions of how much should be required, and who should pay for the children of low income people, are more difficult. Hayek points out the dangers of schools run by the state, and mentions the benefits of competition that Milton Friedman’s voucher plan offers. The most difficult question is how much should be provided beyond the basic minimum, and who should pay for it. Here Hayek notes the many problems that are involved when some aim at achieving “social justice” (which attempts to provide “equal opportunity”), others try to reward “merit,” the difficulty in assessing “merit,” and the fact that much merit has to do with natural endowments and family values, something that is as accidental for the person in question as is being born into a wealthy family (Hayek [1960] 2011, pp. 499-510).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As he put it, in both “animal and human societies...the genetic (and in great measure also the cultural) *transmission* of rules of conduct takes place *from individual to individual*, while what may be called the natural *selection* of rules will operate on the basis of the greater or lesser efficiency of the resulting *order of the group*.” ibid., p. 67, emphasis in the original.

<sup>4</sup> “Let us by all means endeavor to increase opportunities for all. But we ought to do so in the full knowledge that to increase opportunities for all is likely to favor those better able to take advantage of them and may often at first increase inequalities. Where the demand for ‘equality of opportunity’ leads to

In the final sections of the chapter Hayek takes up some issues of more direct concern to spontaneous orders. He worries that the “democratic broadening” of education may reduce the amount of original research in which students learn as working as an apprentice to a creative scientist or scholar. He worries that there may be an overemphasis on “applied” rather than “pure” research, and links this to questions of the “academic freedom” to pursue one’s own research. He links this to attempts to “organize science,” which he opposes:

Academic freedom ...means that there should be as many independent centers of work as possible, in which at least those men who have proved their capacity to advance knowledge and their devotion to their task can themselves determine the problems on which they are to spend their energies and where they can expound the conclusions they have reached, whether or not these conclusions are palatable to their employer or the public at large (ibid., p. 512).

At the end of the chapter Hayek links his ideas about higher education to his general themes of the importance of free institutions and competition to promote the discovery, use, and sharing of knowledge:

There is perhaps no more important application of our main theses than that the advance of knowledge is likely to be fastest where scientific pursuits are not determined by some unified conception of their social utility, and where each proved man can devote himself to the tasks in which he sees the best chance of making a contribution.

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Nowhere is freedom more important than where our ignorance is the greatest – at the boundaries of knowledge. In other words, where nobody can predict what lies a step ahead. ...the ultimate aim of freedom is the enlargement of those capacities in which man surpasses his ancestors and to which each generation must endeavour to add its share – its share in the growth of knowledge and the gradual advance of moral and aesthetic beliefs, where no superior must be allowed to enforce one set of views of what is right or good and where only further experience can decide what should prevail (ibid., p. 515).

I close with a few questions, with initial stabs at answers to in parentheses:

1. Hayek argues that freedom is important because it allows us to discover, use, share, and coordinate knowledge. Is freedom instrumental for Hayek? (Kind of. His focus was always on expanding knowledge and the benefits to the community from that. At least in his writings about spontaneous orders, Hayek was more of a scientist than a moral philosopher.)
2. Are the rules imposed by federal agencies and accrediting bodies the sorts of rules that Hayek was talking about when he described how spontaneous orders form? Or are they more like rules that govern what he calls “organizations.” (More like the latter.)

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attempts to eliminate such ‘unfair advantages,’ it is only likely to do harm. All human differences, whether they are differences in natural gifts or in opportunities, create unfair advantages. But, since the chief contribution of any individual is to make the best use of the accidents he encounters, success must to a great extent be a matter of chance” (Hayek [1960] 2011, p. 510).

3. Is increasing competition in higher education what we need to do? Is this an act of creating an order? Is that a contradiction? (It is a tension, but one that Hayek got around by saying that, by getting rid of rules against competition, he was creating room for orders to spring up.)
4. What is academic freedom, and what link is there to the development of spontaneous orders? (He seems to have an image of a well-established creative scholar being left alone to pursue his own research. Sounds like Hayek!)

#### Works Cited

Hayek, F. A. [1960] *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. Ed. Ronald Hamowy, vol. 17 (2011) of *The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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