

Hayek's Critique of Reason

EUGENE F. MILLER

I SHALL BEGIN on a personal note so that I can express my appreciation to Friedrich Hayek as a teacher at the same time that I indicate the purpose of this essay.* I met Hayek for the first time in 1957 when I enrolled for graduate study at the University of Chicago under the Committee on Social Thought; he was one of the distinguished scholars who made up the Committee's faculty. The Committee on Social Thought attempted to overcome the rigidity and narrowness of American graduate education by giving the student almost complete freedom to design and pursue a broad program of study. The student's primary responsibility, prior to the doctoral dissertation, was to study, either independently or in courses of his choice, selected great works of fundamental importance for Western thought. My own list of "fundamentals" included Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, and Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*; and Hayek readily agreed to tutor me in these works. In these tutorial sessions I came to know firsthand the qualities of mind that are so manifest in Hayek's writings—the remarkable breadth of his intellectual interests, his con-

cern for basic issues in moral and political theory, and his unfailing generosity. Many a teacher has been chagrined to discover that free inquiry does not lead necessarily to agreement, but Hayek knew that intellectual freedom is likely to produce instead a diversity of ideas. Thus he continued to offer his full help and encouragement when my inquiries led me to question some fundamental principles of his thought. He sought not to cultivate disciples but to challenge his students to face difficult issues with the same integrity and manliness that marks his own thought. I know, therefore, that Hayek will not regard the critical parts of this essay as indicating any lack of gratitude for his efforts to help this student to discover his true vocation.

My essay will examine what I take to be the foundation of Hayek's thought, namely, the account he gives of human knowledge. There is ample evidence that his work in the special sciences—logic, psychology, ethics, politics and economics—is intended to rest on an epistemological foundation. Hayek relates that as a young man, he had been uncertain whether to become an economist or a psychologist. In the course of his

early studies in theoretical psychology, he formulated the principles that would be developed more fully thirty years later in *The Sensory Order*—a work which, although largely neglected by Hayek's interpreters, offers the most systematic and detailed formulation of his epistemology.¹ Hayek would become, for a time, "a very pure and narrow economic theorist," but difficulties which he encountered in pure economic theory forced him to consider "all kinds of questions usually regarded as philosophical."² The 1936 essay "Economics and Knowledge,"³ which he points to as marking his turn to philosophy, deals directly with epistemological themes.

Hayek's reliance on a theory of knowledge is quite evident in his mature writings, whose central theme is the importance for politics and for science of a correct understanding of the limits of human reason. His political writings over the last three decades emphasize the close connection that has existed since the seventeenth century between theories of politics and theories of knowledge. In Hayek's view the modern world has witnessed a fundamental conflict between two opposing theories of liberty, one genuine and one specious, which arose respectively in England and in France. These theories of liberty are based, in turn, on sharply different views of the nature and limits of human reason. When Hayek has primarily in mind the political side of this modern conflict, he speaks of two kinds of individualism,⁴ or two traditions of freedom,⁵ or two kinds of liberalism.⁶ When he has primarily in mind the epistemological side of this conflict, he speaks of two kinds of rationalism or else of the struggle between rationalism and antirationalism.⁷

The French theory of liberty gives expression to a position that Hayek calls "constructivist" rationalism. In Hayek's view the tradition of constructivist rationalism goes back to Plato, but since its modern career is shaped decisively by the influence of Descartes' philosophy, with its extravagant assumptions about the powers of human reason, Hayek refers frequently to

this tradition as "Cartesian" rationalism. Constructivist or Cartesian rationalism holds that everything which men achieve, including liberty, is the direct result of reason and should therefore be subject to its control. It traces all discoverable order in human society to deliberate human design and expresses contempt for institutions that are not consciously designed and not intelligible to reason. In order to facilitate central planning towards deliberately chosen goals, it would give political authorities a broad discretionary power to organize and direct all social and economic activities and to circumscribe human freedom. The tradition of constructivist rationalism was carried forward after the French Enlightenment by Hegel, Marx, and the philosophical and legal positivists.⁸

The British theory of liberty, which Hayek himself defends, gives expression to an epistemological viewpoint that Hayek calls "critical" rationalism. The roots of critical rationalism go back to classical antiquity, specifically, to the thought of Aristotle and Cicero. This tradition was transmitted to the modern age mainly through the work of St. Thomas Aquinas. It finds expression in the political thought of such British writers as Locke, Mandeville, Hume, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and Burke. Continental adherents of this position include Montesquieu, Constant, Tocqueville, Acton, the Austrian economist Carl Menger, and finally Karl R. Popper, whom Hayek credits for coining the term "critical rationalism."⁹ The critical rationalists deny that human reason is capable of understanding and directing the processes of society. They trace most of the order which we find in human affairs not to rational design but to the spontaneous unforeseen consequences of individual actions. Believing that civilization develops cumulatively by a process of trial and error, they counsel the individual to submit to conventions which are not the result of intelligent design and which may seem unintelligible and irrational. In the area of political theory, critical rationalism holds that the pri-

mary responsibility of government is not the central direction of all activity but rather the enforcement of universal rules of just conduct, which will circumscribe the coercive power of government and provide each individual with an assured private sphere in which he can use his bit of knowledge for his own betterment. This freedom under law will contribute to the growth of an undesigned, spontaneous order of human activities of much greater complexity and also of much greater benefit to man than ever would have been produced by deliberate arrangement.¹⁰

I agree with Hayek's contention that an adequate account of economics and politics must rest upon a proper understanding of the character of human knowledge. He argues persuasively that the sober estimate of man's rational capacities which underlies classical British liberalism and American constitutionalism is more sound in its political consequences than the extravagant rationalism which marks the opposing stream of radical and utopian thought. The adherents of the modern tradition of "constructivist rationalism" have indeed been led by an imprudent estimate of the powers of reason to undermine sound institutions and destroy decent traditions.

What I wish to question is Hayek's understanding of the character of his own critique of reason. First of all, Hayek's critical rationalism cannot properly be understood as the continuation of a pre-modern, Aristotelian tradition in philosophy. A serious examination of ancient philosophy would have provided Hayek with a solid alternative to constructivist rationalism. That he did not undertake such an examination is suggested, for example, by his failure to see that Plato and Aristotle are much closer in their philosophical views to each other than either is to any of the moderns, such as Descartes or Hume. Hayek opposes the modern tradition of continental rationalism by appealing to an "antirationalist" tradition of British thought whose chief representative is Hume. He does not give sufficient consideration to the fact that

both traditions are modern and, by virtue of this, have more in common with each other than either has with pre-modern or classical thought. Thus he fails to consider the possibility that the grave defects that he attributes to the rationalist tradition are intrinsic to modern thought as such. More serious, however, is the fact that his own account of knowledge does not simply reproduce the empiricism of eighteenth-century British philosophy, as one might assume. It is true that Hayek shares Hume's desire to establish once and for all the limits of reason and thereby to discredit efforts to refashion society along perfectly rational lines. Yet Hayek goes much further than even Hume or Kant in calling into question reason's power to know the nature of things. These philosophers had continued to attribute to rational knowledge an essential constancy and stability, which was thought to be guaranteed by the uniformity of human nature or by the permanency of the mind's own structure. Hayek takes the fateful step of making reason a part of the historical process. Rather than returning to ancient or even to eighteenth century thought, Hayek embraces the most recent and radical stream of modernity. Although he opposes the contemporary epistemological position that he calls "extreme historicism" or "historical relativism," he seems to have abandoned the ground on which reasoned opposition to this position can hope to succeed. By basing his political theory on an insecure epistemological foundation, Hayek endangers those very principles of liberty that he wishes to defend.

I

THE PROBLEMS that arise in Hayek's account of human knowledge are visible already in *The Road to Serfdom*. In this early work, as in all of his later writings, Hayek seeks to discredit the claim that the reason of individual men can plan and control the comprehensive processes of society for the common welfare.¹¹ His line of attack

is to deny reason's independence or autonomy with respect to the social process. Far from being able to understand and guide the social process from above, "individual reason" is immersed in this process and shaped decisively by it. Hayek's position means, first of all, that there is an accumulation of wisdom in the social process which far surpasses the bits of knowledge that individual minds can attain; and no individual mind is capable of supervising this accumulation. As Hayek explains, "[t]he growth of reason is a social process," based on the interaction of individuals with different knowledge and different views. It is only in the course of this social process that the individual errors of irrational and fallible men are corrected. We cannot plan or organize the growth of reason or even predict its outcome, because it is impossible to know in advance which views will or will not assist this growth.¹² The proper attitude of individual men is one of "humility toward the impersonal and anonymous social processes" by which they help to create things greater than they know.¹³

Hayek's principle that reason grows as a social process may imply more, however, than just the idea that the fund of knowledge available to man grows cumulatively or incrementally without conscious direction. He speaks, for example, of the need to recognize "the superindividual forces which guide the growth of reason."¹⁴ What are these "superindividual forces" by which the growth of reason is guided? Are they rational in character and thus comprehensible to man, or does the growth of reason depend on forces that are essentially irrational? Is the reasoning of individual men determined by these forces in such a way that ways of viewing the world are relative to particular times and places? In recent decades, these questions have been debated under the general heading of "historicism." Hayek takes up these questions directly in several essays that were prepared at more or less the same time as *The Road to Serfdom*.

Hayek points out that the term "historicism" is often applied in a somewhat confused way to two quite different points of view. It is used, on the one hand, to refer to the "older historical school" in nineteenth century German thought, whose precursors include Adam Smith and Edmund Burke. Hayek is mildly critical of the older historical school for its anti-theoretical bias, but he applauds its suggestion that social institutions arise not as the product of conscious design, as eighteenth-century rationalists had held, but as the unintended result of the separate actions of many individuals.¹⁵ The term "historicism" is used, on the other hand, to refer to the philosophies or theories of history that have been developed by writers such as Hegel, Comte, Marx, Sombart and Spengler. Theoretical historicism regards historical complexes as given wholes, which develop through definite stages according to intelligible laws. According to this view, the human mind is always determined in its particular manifestations by a specific historical setting; and it develops as part of the comprehensive historical process according to laws that are accessible to theoretical understanding. Hayek is sharply critical of theoretical historicism on several grounds, especially its assumption that historical wholes are given to the observer rather than constructed by him and its belief that human reason can attain a direct insight into the laws of historical development and even predict its future course.¹⁶

Hayek is by no means the first to oppose the view that reason can discover laws of historical development and thus predict the shape of man's life in the future. By the early decades of the twentieth century, this grandiose claim on behalf of reason was under heavy attack in academic circles. Yet the repudiation of theoretical historicism raised a critical problem for its opponents, *i.e.*, the problem of historical relativism. Prior to the rise of historicism, philosophers had assumed that theoretical knowledge is constant from one time and place to another, either because the natural world

was thought to have a permanent structure which reason could grasp or, in cases where the intelligibility of the external world was questioned, because the human mind itself was thought to operate according to invariant principles. Theoretical historicism had taught that men necessarily hold different views of the world in different historical epochs, because the very categories or concepts of human thought are determined by conditions that are unique to each epoch. Nevertheless, it was able to save the possibility of theoretical understanding by maintaining that there is one privileged epoch in which men are able finally to understand the laws by which the historical process as a whole has developed. When opponents of theoretical historicism rejected its doctrine that reason can understand the laws of historical development but nonetheless retained its views on the variability of the human mind and the determination of thought by historical forces, historical relativism was the inevitable result. Historical relativism teaches that human thought is always based on concepts or presuppositions that vary from one time or place to another, so that men necessarily hold different worldviews in different historical epochs. Things have a different "meaning" for men at different times and places. Reason is unable to understand the forces that determine its own operations, because these forces are irrational and mysterious. The historical relativist concludes that there is no possibility of final truth about nature or history and thus no possibility of science or theory in the traditional sense of these terms.¹⁷

We must inquire now as to Hayek's success in avoiding the relativistic conclusions about human knowledge that follow upon the decay of theoretical historicism. Hayek offers a refutation of "the very fashionable doctrine of 'historical relativism'" in essays of his that first appeared in the early 1940's.¹⁸ We must pay careful attention to the structure of this refutation, because it provides us with something of a standard for judging his success in overcoming his-

torical relativism in what he says later about the character of human reason.

Hayek points out that a "[c]onsistently pursued historicism necessarily leads to the view that the human mind is itself variable."¹⁹ All concepts come to be regarded "as merely historical categories, valid only in a particular historical context."²⁰ This means that men must necessarily conceive of objects such as "price" or "monopoly" differently from one time and place to another. There can be no timeless generalizations or universal theories about society and its institutions. All social theory, according to a strict historicism, is "necessarily historical, *zeitgebunden*, true only of particular historical 'phases' or 'systems.'"²¹ Hayek's refutation of historical relativism rests on the premise that man as man thinks in terms of certain inevitable categories:

There is nothing paradoxical in the claim that all mind must run in terms of certain universal categories of thought, because where we speak of mind this means that we can successfully interpret what we observe by arranging it in these categories. And anything which can be comprehended through our understanding of other minds, anything which we recognize as specifically human, must be comprehensible in terms of these categories.²²

Hayek argues as follows: Whenever we recognize or understand other men at all as human beings or human minds, we do so by analogy to our own mind. We explain their intentions and the meaning of their actions in terms of the familiar categories of our own thought. We assume that the structure of their minds is not essentially different from that of our own mind. This analogical recognition of other minds is the basis on which we understand not only our contemporaries, but also men of other epochs and the signs and documents which they have left behind. History is accessible to us only on the assumption that the minds of men in the past reflect the same structure and the same categories as our minds.

The historicist thus utters a "meaningless statement" when he contends that the human mind is variable or that mental categories change from one historical epoch to another. In Hayek's words, "to recognize something as mind is to recognize it as something similar to our own mind."²³ Again, "where we can no longer recognize categories of thought similar to those in terms of which we think, history ceases to be human history."²⁴ Hayek concludes that since certain invariable features are present whenever we find men, true theoretical statements or generalizations must be possible in the social sciences.²⁵

II

WITH THIS refutation of historicism in mind, let us turn now to Hayek's account of human knowledge in *The Sensory Order*, which was published in 1952. As we have seen, Hayek's early case against a relativistic view of knowledge rests on the premise that the human mind is essentially invariable from one historical epoch to another and that it always thinks in terms of certain universal categories. We shall find that in Hayek's later writings, this very premise becomes questionable, so that we are compelled to wonder if Hayek has surrendered the ground on which his case against historical relativism once rested.

Hayek's point of departure in *The Sensory Order* is the fundamental difference between the way the world appears to our senses and the way the world is described by modern science. Objects in the world appear to us as alike or different according to their sensory qualities, but "the progress of the physical sciences has all but eliminated these qualities from our scientific picture of the external world."²⁶ Science finds that our sensory classification of events in terms of qualities is inadequate to describe the regularities that exist in the physical world. In order to give a satisfactory account of these regularities, it must abandon the sensory classification and define objects instead in terms of observed relations be-

tween them. Thus it happens that the objects of the world around us are arranged or classified in two different orders: the "sensory" or "phenomenal" order of perceived qualities; and the "physical" order of events described exclusively in terms of their relations.²⁷

At this point in Hayek's exposition, it might occur to someone to ask what order of things is real: the world as we perceive it or the world as it is described by physical science. Hayek disclaims any interest in what things "really" are.²⁸ Nevertheless, his entire argument depends on his acceptance of the veracity of the scientific account of the world. Thus he observes that "we are not entitled to assume that the world appears to us as it does because it is like that."²⁹ Indeed, he speaks even of "the necessity of a belief in an objective physical world which is different from that presented to us by our senses."³⁰ Thus arises the central problem of *The Sensory Order*: If we cannot assume that the world appears to us as it does because it is like that, "the question why it appears to us as it does becomes a genuine problem."³¹ This problem is one to which theoretical psychology must address itself: "[P]sychology must take the physical world as represented by modern physics as given and try to reconstruct the process by which the organism classifies the physical events in the manner which is familiar to us as the order of sensory qualities."³²

Hayek's formulation of the problem of theoretical psychology permits us to make some very important observations about the philosophical basis of his thought. First, we see his decisive break with the ancient view that things themselves possess forms or natures, including the qualities perceived by the senses, which provide the basis for our qualitative distinctions and our classification of things according to their kinds. Hayek takes the view that science can account for things entirely in terms of their relations and effects, so that there is no need to assume that essential qualities or forms inhere in the things themselves. He

is quite emphatic in denying that the mind's classification of things is ever based on the discovery of natural kinds or classes or qualities. Despite his unqualified condemnation of Descartes' philosophy, Hayek's own distinction between the phenomena, or the things as they appear to us, and the things as they subsist in the world external to the mind is a reflection of the Cartesian dualism between mind and world that has permeated modern thought. Second, Hayek is deeply influenced by the Kantian view that sense data are never accessible to consciousness in their original or pure state, but only as they are transformed by the mind's own apparatus of classification. For Hayek, the mind's sensory qualities function in much the same way as Kant's categories to predetermine the forms of sense experience: "All that we can perceive is thus determined by the order of sensory qualities which provides the 'categories' in terms of which sense experience can alone take place."³³ It follows that the mind's classificatory scheme or "frame of reference" "can never be contradicted by sense experiences and will determine the forms of such experiences which are possible."³⁴ This Kantian dimension of Hayek's thought leads him to break decisively with the positivist view that experience provides us with "an original pure core of sensation" from which a reliable picture of the external world can be built up.³⁵ Hayek thus anticipates the now fashionable view in anti-positivist philosophy of science that perception is always an interpretation and that scientific theory can never be conclusively tested, *i.e.*, either confirmed or falsified, by experience.³⁶

Let us return to the issue that is of primary concern to us, namely, Hayek's success in upholding the possibility of genuine knowledge against the arguments of extreme historicism or historical relativism. As we have seen, Hayek adopts the Kantian view that sense experience is accessible to consciousness only insofar as it is already interpreted or classified by the categories of the mind. While Kant had taught that

the categories of thought are fixed and invariable, historicists would later take the position that these categories vary from one historical epoch or culture to another, so that men necessarily hold different interpretations of the world in different times and places. Hayek, in his writings of the early 1940's, steadfastly opposes historical relativism on the grounds that the human mind is essentially invariable and that "all mind must run in terms of certain universal categories of thought." In *The Sensory Order*, however, he seems to take the position that the mind and its framework of categories must vary in fundamental ways according to the formative experiences of individuals and groups.

Beginning from stimuli defined in physical terms, Hayek attempts in *The Sensory Order* to reconstruct the physiological process by which the organism classifies physical events in the manner familiar to us as the order of sensory qualities. His first point is that "the difference of the sensory qualities is not due to the communication of a difference in the stimuli."³⁷ Physically different stimuli produce similar sensory qualities, and vice versa. Thus the sensory order cannot be understood as simply the reflection of a corresponding set of physical stimuli. Hayek explains the differential responses of the organism to the various physical stimuli by reference to the ordering of impulses that the stimuli produce in the fibers of the central nervous system. In the course of the development of the species or the individual, a system of connections is built up, through which impulses can be transmitted from fiber to fiber. An individual impulse or group of impulses owes its distinctive quality to its position in the whole system of connections. This system of connections is structurally equivalent to what we know as the order of sensory qualities. Moreover, this underlying physiological mechanism wholly determines the sensory or other mental qualities.³⁸

We are concerned primarily with what Hayek has to say about the stability and uniformity of the classificatory system—

the system of sensory qualities or mental categories—that is created by these physiological processes. His emphasis throughout *The Sensory Order* is on the variability of the mind and its cognitive structure. Hayek denies that mind can be understood as a distinct “substance.”³⁹ What we call “mind” is “a particular order of a set of events taking place in some organism and in some manner related to but not identical with, the physical order of events in the environment.”⁴⁰ We should not imagine that the network of physiological connections underlying the sensory order is something innate in the human organism. It is “acquired in the course of the development of the species and the individual” as a result of the organism’s reaction to stimuli in its physical environment.⁴¹ Thus the mind’s apparatus of classification is “shaped by the conditions prevailing in the environment in which we live.”⁴² Since cognitive structure is determined by the organism’s past “experiences,” *i.e.*, its preconscious reactions to environmental stimuli, it is not surprising to find that these structures, while similar among individuals whose past experiences are similar, are not identical.⁴³ Again, it is not surprising to find that “the qualitative elements of which the phenomenal world is built up, and the whole order of the sensory qualities, are themselves subject to continuous change.”⁴⁴ All of these implications of Hayek’s position are brought out in the analogy he draws between the organism’s physiological-mental classificatory system and a map:

This “map” of the relationships between various kinds of events in the external world, which the linkages will gradually produce in the higher nervous centres, will not only be a very imperfect map, but also a map which is subject to continuous although very gradual change. It will not only give merely some of the relations existing in the external world, and give in addition some which are different from those which exist objectively, but it will also not give a constant but

a variable picture of the structures which it reproduces.⁴⁵

The maps formed in different brains will be similar to each other because they are determined by similar factors, but they will not be identical:

Complete identity of the maps would presuppose not only an identical history of the different individuals but also complete identity of their anatomical structure. The mere fact that for each individual the map will be subject to constant changes practically precludes the possibility that at any moment the maps of two individuals should be completely identical.⁴⁶

The far-reaching epistemological implications of *The Sensory Order* should now be apparent. On the one hand, Hayek wants to retain the idea that science can give a reliable explanation of regularities in the objective physical world. Indeed, his account of human cognition presupposes the validity of his physiological explanation of the principles that underlie the cognitive processes. On the other hand, his general conclusions about the character of human cognition seem to undermine the very possibility of objective knowledge and to concede the basic premises of extreme historicism. He argues that all perception and reasoning are predetermined by a classificatory system or “map” that varies from one individual and group to another and changes over time. The categories of this classificatory system cannot be confirmed or falsified, because as the presuppositions of all cognition they give to sense perception and conceptual thinking their distinctive shape. We are sometimes forced to revise our apparatus of classification upon discovering that beliefs or expectations which result from it are disappointed or disproved. The process of “reclassification” does not lead, however, to a “presupposition-free” grasp of the objective world, but rather to an understanding of the world in terms of a different frame of reference:

While the process of reclassification involves a change of the frame of reference, or of what is *a priori* true of all statements which can be made about the objects defined with respect to that frame of reference, it alters merely the particular presuppositions of all statements, but does not change the fact that such presuppositions must be implied in all statements that can be made.⁴⁷

Hayek thus agrees with Kant that perception and reasoning always presuppose "*a priori*" categories of thought, but he embraces the view of extreme historicism that this *a priori* is neither constant nor universal but varies from one frame of reference to another. As Heinrich Klüver points out in his "Introduction" to *The Sensory Order*, Hayek dissolves "substances" and "things" into changeable relations. Even "mind" for him has turned into a complex of relations. Not only are there no permanent or fixed objects: "The implication of the theory presented here is that even the ways of knowing 'objectively' are not stable, or only relatively stable, and that the ordering principles themselves are subject to change."⁴⁸

III

TURNING finally to Hayek's philosophical essays of the 1950's and 1960's, which are brought together in his *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, we find that he continues to affirm the epistemological principles of *The Sensory Order*, although he restates them in the idiom of contemporary philosophy. Thus instead of speaking of a physiological mechanism of classification that underlies and determines all conscious mental operations, he speaks in terms of implicit and unspecifiable "rules" that govern our perceptions and actions. These rules operate upon the contents of consciousness, but cannot themselves be made conscious. We are not aware of them and cannot test them. As the presuppositions of thought, they are "outside the range of what we can either state or reflect

upon."⁴⁹ This framework of rules determines the "meaning" of conscious thought, but the framework itself is without meaning. Meaning depends on an order that is essentially meaningless: "[I]f 'to have meaning' is to have a place in an order which we share with other people, this order itself cannot have meaning because it cannot have a place in itself."⁵⁰

In *The Sensory Order*, Hayek had explained the acquisition of the categories of thought in physiological terms. Later, in keeping with the emphasis of contemporary philosophy, he suggests that the framework of categories or presuppositions on which thought depends might be acquired along with a language. The tradition of Scottish philosophy as well as the recent findings of social anthropology provide us with

the insight that even man's capacity to think is not a natural endowment of the individual but a cultural heritage, something transmitted not biologically but through example and teaching—mainly through, and implicit in, the teaching of language. The extent to which the language which we learn in early childhood determines our whole manner of thinking and our view and interpretation of the world is probably much greater than we are yet aware of. It is not merely that the knowledge of earlier generations is communicated to us through the medium of language; the structure of the language itself implies certain views about the nature of the world; and by learning a particular language we acquire a certain picture of the world, a framework of our thinking within which we henceforth move without being aware of it. As we learn as children to use our language according to rules which we do not explicitly know, so we learn with language not only to act according to the rules of language, but according to many other rules of interpreting the world and of acting appropriately, rules which will guide us though we

have never explicitly formulated them. This phenomenon of implicit learning is clearly one of the most important parts of cultural transmission, but one which we as yet only imperfectly understand.⁵¹

This passage sheds light on Hayek's statement in *The Constitution of Liberty* to the effect that human reason has grown and can successfully operate only with and within a framework of institutions and morals, language and law, that has evolved by a process of cumulative growth.⁵² This "evolutionary interpretation of all phenomena of culture and mind" leads to reverence for the tradition of civilization on which reason depends, but which reason cannot design or justify.⁵³ It appeals to men to see that if we are to use our reason intelligently, "we must preserve that indispensable matrix of the uncontrolled and non-rational which is the only environment wherein reason can grow and operate effectively."⁵⁴

IV

THE VIEW of knowledge that Hayek calls "constructive rationalism" has its roots in the understanding of theoretical science that was formulated in the seventeenth century by such founders of modern philosophy as Bacon, Hobbes and Descartes. These philosophers specifically rejected the ancient notion of science as contemplative knowledge of eternal first causes or forms of being. They demanded a theoretical science that could be put to use for the relief of man's estate. Science could become useful by giving an account of nature at work, *i.e.*, a mechanics or dynamics of nature. It would seek the principles or causes not of permanent and unchangeable things, which the ancients had regarded as the highest and noblest objects of theoretical understanding, but of the common things, things that come into being or can be generated, things that men use. If we know how things come to be or the causes that produce them, we can, when the proper conditions come

within our power, make things come to be or produce such effects as we desire. This knowledge of causes is useful knowledge. It enables man to conquer nature and subject it to his control. The difference between ancient and modern views of theoretical science has been stated concisely by Hans Jonas:

To put it in the form of a slogan, the modern knowledge of nature, very unlike the classical one, is a "know-how" and not a "know what," and on this basis it makes good Bacon's contention that knowledge is power.⁵⁵

As Jonas points out, the modern notion of science is technological by its very nature. It presupposes that knowledge is intended for practical use.⁵⁶ It leads perhaps more necessarily than Hayek recognizes to what he calls "the engineering type of mind."⁵⁷

The search for a clear and fundamental alternative to "constructive rationalism" would seem to lead in one of two directions. First, we might adopt the critique of reason that emerges in modern thought itself and culminates in the extreme historicism of the past century. I have concluded that this is the path which Hayek eventually follows. His reformulation of classical liberalism "is based on an evolutionary interpretation of all phenomena of culture and mind and on an insight into the limits of the powers of the human reason." It is consequently "reverent of tradition and recognizes that all knowledge and all civilization rests on tradition."⁵⁸ The fact is, however, that "tradition" is not a single, unified phenomenon. What we call "Western civilization" is but one of many traditions of mankind; and internal to it are many divergent and conflicting strands. Hayek himself acknowledges that the tradition of constructivist rationalism is as old and as strong within Western civilization as the tradition of critical rationalism. What are we to do in the face of this conflict among and within traditions? Hayek leaves us only the options of submitting humbly to the tradition which makes the most forceful

claim upon us or else of choosing boldly but blindly among competing traditions. He eliminates the possibility that we can make a rational choice among traditions on the basis of what is true or good by nature. Reason cannot judge among traditions, because it can function only within such a matrix as tradition itself supplies; and this matrix is non-rational and devoid of meaning. Moreover, there are no permanent values by reference to which reason could make this judgment. All human values are the result of a long process of evolution, and they continue to change in the course of this process. Thus we are probably entitled to conclude that

our present values exist only as the elements of a particular cultural tradition and are significant only for some more or less long phase of evolution—whether this phase includes some of our pre-human ancestors or is confined to certain periods of human civilization. We have no more ground to ascribe to them eternal existence than to the human race itself.⁵⁹

But if this is the case, what rational defense is there for those values or virtues on which the working of an individualist society depends, now that the collectivist tradition has virtually undermined them?⁶⁰ How are we to justify free institutions, if not on the ground that reason shows them to contribute most to man's well-being and happiness?

The second path that we might follow in searching for an alternative to the modern tradition of "constructivist rationalism" leads back to a premodern understanding of theoretical and practical science. In the view of Plato and Aristotle, theoretical science is neither inherently technological nor at the service of man's desire for power or control over common things. It aims instead at contemplative knowledge of the perma-

nent forms of being. This rational activity ennobles the knower and reorients his life, but it neither equips him nor inclines him to bring about a radical transformation of the world of everyday life. One need not set strict limits to reason, as thus understood, or deny its capacity to know the nature of things in order to protect the sphere of practice, for this kind of theoretical reason is not likely to endanger the practical sphere. Genuine freedom, by this account, lies not in man's liberty to act for any purpose whatever, but in his ability through reason to escape the bonds of opinion, whether enforced by political authority or by the more subtle authority of tradition, and to see the order of nature as it is. By contrast to the modern notion of theory, this premodern notion leaves room for a due appreciation of the practical reason or prudence of nontheoretical men, *i.e.*, the capacity to figure out the best course of action in particular cases where things are contingent and uncertain. Hayek points to the need to restore the premodern notion of prudence when he emphasizes that there is no substitute for experience in teaching us how to act in the concrete affairs of life. He stops short of such a restoration in two fundamental ways: he elevates the prudence by which individuals manage their private affairs over political prudence, which plans for the common good; and he conceives of prudence as supplying knowledge of the best means not to the right ends of action, but to whatever ends the individual might choose.⁶¹

*This article is drawn from a more extensive essay entitled "The Cognitive Basis of Hayek's Political Theory," which was presented to a Law and Liberty Conference in San Francisco in January, 1976, sponsored by the Liberty Fund, Inc. The essay will appear in 1977 as part of a volume to be edited by R. L. Cunningham. I am grateful to Professor Cunningham and the Liberty Fund for permission to adapt the essay for use here.

¹*The Sensory Order: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Theoretical Psychology*, Introduction by Heinrich Klüver (Chicago: University of Chicago Press Phoenix Series, 1963). ²*Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 91. ³Reprinted in *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 33-56. ⁴See "Individualism: True and False," in *Individualism and Economic Order*, pp. 1-32. ⁵See *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 54-70. ⁶"The Principles of a Liberal Social Order," in *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, pp. 160-177. ⁷See "Kinds of Rationalism" in *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, pp. 82-95. ⁸See *Road to Serfdom*, pp. 19-21, 35-36, 56-57, 165-166, 203; *Individualism and Economic Order*, pp. 8-10, 18-19; *The Constitution of Liberty*, pp. 57-61; *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, 85, 92-94. ⁹*Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, pp. 94-95. ¹⁰See *Road to Serfdom*, pp. 14-16, 34-36, 165-166; *Individualism and Economic Order*, pp. 8-13, 16-22, 32; *The Constitution of Liberty*, pp. 56-57, 59, 69, 133-175; *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, pp. 38-39, 86-87, 91-93, 130-131, 161-162. ¹¹Collectivist doctrines "necessarily lead to the demand that the mind of some individual should rule supreme" (*The Road to Serfdom*, p. 166). ¹²*The Road to Serfdom*, pp. 165-166. See *Individualism and Economic Order*, p. 8. ¹³*Individualism and Economic Order*, p. 8. ¹⁴*The Road to Serfdom*, p. 166. ¹⁵*The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1955), pp. 64-65. ¹⁶*The Counter-Revolution of Science*, pp. 64-66, 73-74, 76. ¹⁷I have discussed these issues at greater length in "Positivism, Historicism, and Political Inquiry" and "Rejoinder to 'Comments'" in *American Political Science Review*, LXVI (September, 1972), pp. 796-817, 857-873. ¹⁸See, in addition to the essays collected in *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, "The Facts of the Social

Sciences," in *Individualism and Economic Order*, pp. 57-76. ¹⁹*The Counter-Revolution of Science*, p. 76. ²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 75. ²¹*Ibid.*, p. 75. ²²*Ibid.*, p. 78. ²³*Ibid.*, p. 77. ²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 79. ²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 70-72, 76-79. ²⁶*The Sensory Order*, p. 2. ²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 2-8. ²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 4-5; cf. also pp. 173-174. ²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 6. ³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 176. ³¹*Ibid.*, p. 6. ³²*Ibid.*, p. 7. ³³*Ibid.*, p. 167. ³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 167. ³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 42, 165. ³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 142, 169, 171-172. ³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 11. ³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 52-53. ³⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 105, 177. ⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 16; this statement is italicized in the original. ⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 53; see also pp. 52, 106, 167. ⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 165. ⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 110. ⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 108. ⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 110. ⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 110. ⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 169. ⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. xx. ⁴⁹*Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, p. 61. ⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 61. ⁵¹*Ibid.*, pp. 86-87. ⁵²See *The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 57. ⁵³*Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, p. 161. ⁵⁴*The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 69. ⁵⁵Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), p. 204. This quotation appears in an essay entitled "The Practical Uses of Theory," which I have drawn from in discussing the differences between ancient and modern views of theoretical science. ⁵⁶*The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 198. ⁵⁷*The Counter-Revolution of Science*, p. 16. ⁵⁸*Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, p. 161. ⁵⁹*Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, p. 38. ⁶⁰See *The Road to Serfdom*, pp. 212-215; see also the chapter entitled "The Abandoned Road," pp. 10-23. If the individualist tradition has been supplanted by the collectivist tradition, then the former cannot be justified merely by an appeal to tradition. It is necessary to argue, by reference to what is good for man and society, that the individualist tradition is better than collectivism. ⁶¹I have treated these matters at length in an essay entitled "Prudence and the Rule of Law," which will be published in George Parthemos (ed.), *American Democracy and the Rule of Law* by the University of Georgia Press.

Is Politics Insoluble?

HENRY HAZLITT

H. L. MENCKEN was fond of saying that most of the problems men agonize over are inherently insoluble. A haphazard search among his books has failed to turn up a supporting quotation, and perhaps my memory misleads me. He may merely have said "some," not "most" problems. In the latter case, at any rate, I agree with him. I would include at least two whole categories of problems among the insoluble ones. First, all problems commonly classed as metaphysical, ontological or cosmological—such as "How can we tell the really real from the apparently real?" or "What was the First Cause?," or "What is mankind here for?," or "What is the purpose of the universe?" And so on. The second category contains all the really basic political problems.

There are differences, of course, in what is meant by "insolubility" as applied to each of these sets of problems. The metaphysical problems are forever insoluble because man's limited five senses, narrow experience and finite mind cannot possibly encompass eternity, "ultimate" reality, or infinity. The basic political problems, on the other hand, are insoluble because . . . well, for one thing, because we are not even sure what we mean by a "solution."

Suppose we address ourselves to this problem first. What is a "solution?" It is easy to cite an illustration. A man's car fails to start on a cold morning. He finds that his battery is dead, or that his spark plugs are fouled, or that a wire is disconnected, or that the carburetor is flooded, or that he has run out of gas. Once this basic "cause" is discovered, he probably knows how to fix it or have it fixed. Or, again, the man feels some distress; and his doctor identifies it as diabetes and prescribes insulin. Once a doctor has correctly diagnosed a disease with a known palliative or cure, he has "solved" his problem.

In the physical sciences, then, the problems commonly arise because something is working unsatisfactorily, and if we have identified A as the cause and M as the solution, we know we have found the cause and the cure if we can in that and similar cases make things work satisfactorily once again.

But when we turn to the social sciences, and particularly to politics, this kind of certainty or confidence is no longer to be found. Let's take a typical broad problem: What should the state do about the poor and the needy? Historically the answers have run from nothing to everything. The nothing answer has run typically like this: