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Alasdair MacIntyre and F. A. Hayek on the Abuse of Reason

—◆—
BRANDON HARNISH

We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be. . . . If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road. . . . If you look at the present state of the world, it is pretty plain that humanity has been making some big mistakes. We are on the wrong road.

—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

In *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (2007), Alasdair MacIntyre offers a “disquieting suggestion.” He asks the reader to imagine that a catastrophe has beset the natural sciences. All scientists, all science books, and all laboratories have been destroyed. Whatever bits of knowledge are left must be pieced together in fragments. Scientific discourse continues, but only as a shell of its previous state. There is no context or coherence to any of it, and no one quite recognizes the disorder because the philosophies of the day cannot spot it. What purpose does this parable serve? To MacIntyre, the chaotic state of science in this imaginary world is analogous to the state of moral discourse in the actual world. He sees the history of moral discourse in the same way that the history of science appears in the analogy: first, a state of order; second, a catastrophe; and third, a continuing state of disorder.

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The catastrophe to which MacIntyre points is the failure of what he calls the “Enlightenment Project.” He tries to establish the source of the breakdown in the language of moral discourse and to trace the effects of the Enlightenment on modern society. He connects the abuse of reason, or what might be called “rationalism run amok,” to any number of modern bureaucracies, organizations, institutions, disciplines, and schools of thought as well as to some mistaken views of the study of human action.

MacIntyre’s narrative in *After Virtue* and in an assortment of articles¹ is intriguingly paralleled by F. A. Hayek’s “abuse of reason” project, spelled out in *The Counter-revolution of Science* (1979a), *The Road to Serfdom* (2007), and various other works.² Hayek connects an exaggerated faith in the ability of human reason and science, originating with certain Enlightenment thinkers, to a variety of modern problems ranging from behaviorism in psychology to positivism in economics to bureaucratic planning in government. The root of the problem, Hayek emphasizes, is the misguided and prejudiced application of the methods of natural science to problems of social science—that is, what Hayek (1979a) calls *scientism*. Though not meant to be complimentary, MacIntyre and Hayek’s efforts in many ways build a dual case against the rationalist Enlightenment vision and the philosophy of the micromanaging bureaucrat. Both men are arguing that we are on the wrong road: MacIntyre that we are on an emotivist road to nihilism, Hayek that we are on a totalitarian road to serfdom.

This claim is not meant to suggest that MacIntyre and Hayek see eye to eye. The coincidence of their analyses seems all the more interesting because they come from very different backgrounds and have very different points of view. Hayek was a classical liberal, an individualist, and a religious agnostic. MacIntyre was a Trotskyite and a Marxist who eventually converted to Catholicism, and he remains suspicious of capitalism. Their differences create a fascinating and controversial dialogue, though space limitations here preclude a full examination of the interplay between Hayek’s liberalism and MacIntyre’s “revolutionary Aristotelianism.”³

1. Other relevant materials may be found in a number of pieces in MacIntyre 1971, 1990, 1998, 2006a, and 2006b.

2. Unfortunately, Hayek did not complete his “abuse of reason” project, so we are left with *The Counter-revolution of Science* (1979a), which was to have been part of the second section of this work; *The Road to Serfdom* (2007), which was a popular adaptation of the third part; and pieces and ideas scattered in a number of essays collected in Hayek 1948, 1967, and 1978. For a discussion of Hayek’s project, see Caldwell 2004 and the 1959 preface to the German edition of *The Counter-revolution of Science* translated in Hayek 1979a, 9–12.

3. This issue is relevant, and a discussion of it is found in Hayes 2008, which contains the single most thorough treatment of MacIntyre and Hayek to date. Hayes attempts to demonstrate that Hayek’s liberalism meets MacIntyre’s challenge to the Enlightenment Project. It is at least the case that Hayek’s vision of market economies, which sees the price system and economic calculation as coordinating individuals’ expressed values into a civilization-building process, avoids some of the Enlightenment problems that MacIntyre points out. It is worth noting in this regard that Hayek’s Austrian economics is based in Aristotelian first principles; see Gordon 1996. For a discussion of Hayek’s work and thought, see Gamble 1996 and Ebenstein 2001. It must be emphasized and understood that MacIntyre was a critic of liberalism. See MacIntyre 1988, 326–48, and 2007, 244–55.

In this article, I explore the similarities between MacIntyre and Hayek in regard to the Enlightenment's failure and the abuse of reason. I move specifically through those chapters of *After Virtue* in which MacIntyre mounts his attack on the Enlightenment and compare the arguments there with similar arguments from Hayek's corpus of work. In doing so, I consider how MacIntyre and Hayek conceptualize the Enlightenment Project, the consequences of its failure, the nature of human action, the nature of scientific inquiry, and the connection between all of these things and modern bureaucracy and social planning. A broad sketch of the two men's criticisms reveals a four-step downfall from the Enlightenment to emotivism to scientism to socialist planning.

It is worthwhile at this stage to note some general similarities between MacIntyre and Hayek. First, both authors paint with a broad brush and criticize many different thinkers and movements. The nature of their projects demands this approach. MacIntyre is trying to demonstrate how a change in the nature of reason and a move toward "rationalism" in ethics unavoidably leads to nihilism. This demonstration necessarily indicts all thinkers who have attempted to ground morality in rationality, even those who may differ drastically from each other in their rationalist approach (MacIntyre 2007). Hayek is trying to show how the abuse of reason, in a variety of forms, led to socialist planning and the collectivist governments of the twentieth century. This argument necessarily condemns all of the thinkers who fall in the "constructivist rationalist" category, even those who in some respects may be utterly opposite, such as Marx and Hegel (Hayek 1979a).

The Failure of the Enlightenment Project

Both MacIntyre and Hayek see the root failure of the Enlightenment Project as owing to a general overestimation of the authority and power of human reason or, in the reverse, a failure to acknowledge its limits and nature. For MacIntyre, the problem began when "the thinkers of the Enlightenment set out to replace what they took to be discredited traditional and superstitious forms of morality by a kind of secular morality that would be entitled to secure the assent of any rational person" (2007, 70). Such thinkers include Kierkegaard, Kant, Diderot, Hume, and Smith, who, though often differing in their conclusions, pursued the same rationalist construction of ethics (51). The failure of this effort set the stage for a series of rival but logically apodictic moral positions that characterize modern disagreements over ethics. The consequence, MacIntyre explains, was the "releasing into the culture at large a set of moral concepts which derive from their philosophical ancestry an appearance of rational determinateness and justification which they do not in fact possess" (70). Appeals to these moral concepts, despite their lack of the latter qualities, create an aura of objectivity that lends legitimacy and credibility to those who exercise social control.

For Hayek, the problem began with the Cartesian assertion that “the complex order of our modern society is exclusively due to the circumstances that men have been guided in their actions by foresight—an insight into the connection between cause and effect—or at least that it could have arisen through design” (Hayek 1970, 6). The meaning of *reason* changed from “the capacity of the mind to distinguish between good and evil, that is, between what was and what was not in accordance with established rules,” to the “capacity to construct such rules by deduction from explicit premises” (Hayek 1973, 21). *Natural law* became merely another term for “the rule of reason” and thereby lost the meaning it had found in the Scholastic tradition, in Aquinas, and in Aristotle. In this way, the entirety of civilization came to be seen as a product of conscious human ingenuity. What better way, then, to ensure the continual progress of human life and to discover new methods for its advancement than to hire and elect legions of new social planners whose main task it would be to control social phenomena consciously and to scientifically engineer society (Hayek 1973, 21)?

An important caveat at this point is Hayek’s distinction between two types of rationalism: “evolutionary or critical rationalism” and “constructivist rationalism,” which he also calls “individualism true” and “individualism false” (Hayek 1946, 1, 1948, 1, and 1964, 82; see also Diamond 1980 and Gamble 1996, 32). This distinction is vital in understanding why Hayek extols some Enlightenment thinkers, such as Smith, Ferguson, Tucker, and Constant, yet condemns others, such as Descartes, Mill, Comte, and Bentham. It is important further in that it allows Hayek to embrace some Enlightenment thinkers without embracing totalitarian impulses or emotivism.

Hayek describes evolutionary rationalism as an “older natural law theory” in which “reason had meant mainly a capacity to recognize truth, especially moral truth, when they met it, rather than a capacity of deductive reasoning from explicit premises” (1964, 84). MacIntyre’s description of the moral system that preceded the Enlightenment, the moral system of the Middle Ages, in which reason was understood only within a three-part relationship that includes “human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be” and “human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-telos,” is very much like Hayek’s evolutionary rationalism (MacIntyre 2007, 53–54). All in all, evolutionary rationalism appreciated and understood that much of human civilization came about not through deliberate design, but through a gradual, unplanned, spontaneous process.

Constructivist rationalism, in contrast, rejected this tradition and “contended that all useful human institutions were and ought to be deliberate creation of conscious reason” (Hayek 1964, 85). This contention applied to, among other things, written language, spoken language, laws, and ethics (85). Edward Feser has noted the connection of Hayek’s rejection of critical rationalism and embrace of evolutionary rationalism to MacIntyre’s notion of rationality as tradition based:

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre seems also to have something like this in mind in his appeal to the notion of tradition as a key to understanding the

nature of rationality: A rational belief system or moral outlook is, in his view, one which belongs to a tradition of thought within which the basic conceptions of the tradition have gradually been worked out and modified in a systematic way to deal with challenges to it and with new evidence; and one tradition is rationally superior to others when it is better able to solve the problems facing it using its own internal resources than others are, i.e., when it possesses a greater degree of internal coherence. (2003, 22)

Hayek's characterization of civilization as a traditional set of rules and intuitions that has fostered the growth, maturation, and prosperity of society is almost identical to MacIntyre's idea of a rational belief system. That Hayek sees human civilization and human liberty as owing their development to the philosophical tradition of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas and that he sees the constructivist rationalism of Descartes and Bacon as threatening to place humankind on the "road to serfdom" (Hayek 1964, 94) only serve to make him and MacIntyre allies in the advance against both the Enlightenment Project and the totalitarian social planning for which it provided a philosophical foundation and social legitimacy.⁴

From this similar conception of moral values as inseparable from tradition, culture, inheritance, and refinement, MacIntyre and Hayek reject the tendency to separate historical thinkers from their historical context. As Hayek writes, "The picture of man as a being who, thanks to his reason, can rise above the values of his civilisation, in order to judge it from the outside, or from a higher point of view, is an illusion. It simply must be understood that reason itself is a part of civilisation" (1970, 20). And as MacIntyre notes critically, "We all too often still treat the moral philosophers of the past as contributors to a single debate with relatively unvarying subject-matter, treating Plato and Hume and Mill as contemporaries both of ourselves and of each other. This leads to an abstraction of these writers from the cultural and social milieus in which they lived and thought and so the history of their thought acquires a false independence from the rest of culture" (2007, 11). Because both Hayek and MacIntyre spot the problem in conceiving of history and philosophy in this way—the problem being its underlying noumenalistic notion of reason—they share a skepticism regarding the organization of the modern academy (Hayek 1956; MacIntyre 2007, 11, 61).⁵

This organization of academic study or, perhaps more accurately, this separation reflects the transition of thought into modernity, and MacIntyre sees it as spreading

4. Hayek sees the Scottish Enlightenment as anti-Cartesian in nature. Further, for him, some of the purer adherents to the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition are Tocqueville, Lord Acton, and Carl Menger of the Austrian school of economics.

5. The term *historicism* has more than one meaning. On one hand, it refers to what might be called an "anti-Lord Acton view" that scorns moral judgment in the study and writing of history. On the other hand, it refers to a method of history that searches for laws of historical development in the same style as Hegel or Marx. Karl Popper popularized the latter meaning, and I use the term in that sense in this article.

the false notion that ideas and actions ought to be studied separately, that ideas are endowed with an “independent life of their own on the one hand and political and social action is . . . peculiarly mindless on the other” (2007, 61). MacIntyre laments the separation of fact and value that appears to be implicit in scholarly specialization.

Hayek likewise expresses concern over the division between the humanities and the social sciences and the new approach to which this division gave rise. He quotes Albert Einstein to illustrate his point that science without epistemology—insofar as it is thinkable at all—is primitive and muddled (1956, 131).⁶ This approach is epitomized by the German sociologist Torgny T. Segerstedt, whom Hayek quotes: “The most important goal that sociology has set for itself is to predict the future development and to shape the future, or, if one prefers to express it in that manner, to create the future of mankind” (in Hayek 1970, 6).

MacIntyre expresses this search for a formula of social development as, tellingly, a hunt for the position of God. “[O]mniscience excludes the making of decisions. If God knows everything that will occur, he confronts no as yet unmade decision. He has a single will. It is precisely insofar as we differ from God that unpredictability invades our lives. This way of putting the point has one particular merit: it suggests precisely what project those who seek to eliminate unpredictability from the social world or to deny it may be engaging in” (2007, 97). How the Enlightenment shift toward constructivist rationalism profoundly affected the social sciences or, perhaps more fundamentally, how the shift in the way man confronted questions of value and questions of fact changed his approach to the study of human action begins to become clear. MacIntyre and Hayek see utilitarianism and emotivism as two results of the Enlightenment shift (Hayek 1970, 14; MacIntyre 2007, 62). As manifestations of rationalism, these philosophies fostered the new social science ideology and made mankind feel the full and practical consequences of the Enlightenment Project’s failure. Both MacIntyre and Hayek have a great deal to say on this matter.

Rationalism and Utilitarianism

The consequences of the failure of the Enlightenment Project are twofold. There is, first, a philosophical descent into a “constructivist” rationalism divorced from its previous hierarchy. From this comes a transformation both intellectual and social in nature. As MacIntyre describes, “On the one hand the individual moral agent, freed from hierarchy and teleology, conceives of himself and is conceived of by moral philosophers as sovereign in his moral authority. On the other hand the inherited, if

6. This mentality, Hayek notes, is owed to the French Revolution, which in 1795 replaced the old university system, based on the classics, with the *écoles centrales*. Hayek illustrates the change with a quote from Saint-Simon, who in 1812 reflected that “thirty years ago, if one wanted to know whether a person had received a distinguished education, one asked: ‘Does he know his Greek and Latin authors well?’ Today one asks: ‘Is he good at mathematics? Is he familiar with the achievements of physics, of chemistry, of natural history, in short of the positive sciences of those of observation?’” (in Hayek 1979a, 196).

partially transformed rules of morality have to be found some new status, deprived as they have been of their older teleological character and their even more ancient categorical character as expressions of an ultimately divine law” (2007, 62). As the traditional teleological conception of human action fades out and the new rationalist conception takes hold, a new foundation for action must be constructed or found in order to avoid a fall into nihilism or emotivism. MacIntyre sees this situation as producing a search for one of two alternatives. Either a new teleology must be devised or an entirely new categorical status must be created. The former, in MacIntyre’s analysis, produces utilitarianism, and the latter produces the Kantian effort to ground moral rules in the nature of practical reason. Both of these attempts, he believes, fail, with emotivism as the eventual consequence (2007, 61).

Hayek also expresses alarm. He describes the modern philosophical collapse as a fundamental break with the acceptance of traditional (and perhaps not always fully understood) values and social orders that are not rationally grounded or deliberately controllable. He calls this “desire to see in everything the product of conscious individual reason” a false individualism (1946, 25). This view ties closely to what MacIntyre perceives as the Cartesian invention of the individual, of the modern self, which separates itself from the “inherited modes both of thought and practice in the course of a single and unified history” (2007, 61).

The discussion now comes to an intriguing point because although Hayek agrees with MacIntyre on the problems of rationalism and its ultimate connection to emotivism, he treats Kant favorably. Perhaps MacIntyre has uncovered a contradiction in Hayek? After all, Kant’s rationalist approach surely falls somewhat outside the evolutionary rationalism that Hayek commends. Hayek acknowledges that Kant never wholly escaped the “fatal attraction of Rousseau and French rationalism” (1964, 94), but he seems to believe that Kant’s ethical system is not as rationalistic as it may appear: “It is sometimes suggested that Kant developed his theory of *Rechtsstaat* by applying to public affairs his moral conception of the categorical imperative. It was probably the other way around, and Kant developed his theory of the categorical imperative by applying morals to the concept of the rule of law which he found already made” (1967, 117).⁷ Hayek esteems Kant, but the extent of his fondness never exceeds his idea of tradition and therefore does not threaten his consistency when he speaks of the abandoned road of Western civilization. In this context, Hayek

7. The rule of law is a vital concept for Hayek’s tradition-based orders. It is distinct from absolutism, which implies the constructivist rationalism and economic controls that Hayek considers anathema to evolutionary rationalism and to the rule of law. Rather, the rule of law is a piecemeal development of Western thinking that came to bind the power of the state under a codified set of rules called “laws” or “constitutions.” For Hayek, the phrase “a government of laws not men” is not just a colloquialism. It is the essential difference between a free society and a planned society. That he sees Kant as a torchbearer for the rule of law explains precisely why he extols the German philosopher. In this light, we can also understand how Hayek can square Kant’s ethics with Hume’s epistemological skepticism and pessimism because the rule of law serves as a protection against meddlers who think they know more than they really do. Hayek seems most concerned with protecting civilization from just such meddlers: “The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design” (1988, 76; see also Hayek 1960, 162–77, and Caldwell 2004, 347).

appreciates Kant's distinction between the rules in society that foster the organic growth of spontaneous orders, including the rule of law, and the rules in society that are particular in nature and aim to organize society under the plan of an authority or social manager (1966, 166). He also appreciates Kant's understanding of the socio-logical repercussions of moral philosophy (1966, 168). In this regard, MacIntyre never breaks entirely with Kant (2007, 23).

Hayek, though a classical liberal, does not in his discussion of law pursue or advocate a ground-up construction of rights in the same Kantian spirit as modern Austrian school philosopher Hans-Hermann Hoppe⁸ or Austrian economist Murray N. Rothbard.⁹ Moreover, Hayek's work is not typically laden with references or appeals to such philosophical constructs as rights. When Hayek refers to libertarian principles, he normally appeals to broader concepts such as individualism, liberty, tolerance, peace, and justice—all grounded in the thought, traditions, and foundations of the Greeks, the Romans, and Christianity (Hayek 1946; 1964; 1966; 1979b, 153–76; 2007, 65–75). When he brings natural rights or the rights of man into the picture, it is generally in the context of the Western tradition and the rule of law or at least in the context of thinkers whom he sees as carrying on that tradition. In the end, Hayek discards outright rationalist theories of natural law, regarding them as inconsistent with the evolutionary approach that, he believes, rejects “the interpretation of law as the deliberate construct of any human mind” (1976, 60).

Both MacIntyre and Hayek submit utilitarianism to a serious critique, viewing it as linked to emotivism and, at root, as emerging from empiricism or positivism (Hayek 1970, 14; MacIntyre 2007, 65). It fails because no single scale of utility exists by which to measure or judge action. There is no way of summing up or computing the polymorphous and heterogeneous objects of human desire.¹⁰ As Hayek explains, “The welfare and happiness of millions cannot be measured on a single scale of less and more. The welfare of a people, like the happiness of a man, depends on a great many things that can be provided in an infinite variety of combinations” (2007, 101). MacIntyre echoes this reasoning: “The pleasure-of-drinking-Guinness is not the pleasure-of-swimming-at-Crane's-Beach, and the swimming and the drinking are not two different means for providing the same

8. Hoppe (2006) attempts to demonstrate an ultimate justification of private-property rights through Ludwig von Mises's praxeological method. His goal is to demonstrate that private-property rights have an ethical justification beyond utilitarianism and that this justification can be shown through logical proofs following from the axiom that human beings act.

9. Rothbard (1998) presents an interesting blend of Aristotelianism, natural-law Thomism, and the rationalism of Hugo Grotius.

10. Hayek also notes this problem in *The Counter-revolution of Science*: “The blind transfer of the striving for quantitative measurements to a field in which the specific conditions are not present which give its basic importance in the natural sciences, is the result of an entirely unfounded prejudice. It is probably responsible for the worst aberrations and absurdities produced by scientism in the social sciences. It not only leads frequently to the selection for study of the most irrelevant aspects of the phenomena because they happen to be measurable, but also to ‘measurements’ and assignments of numerical values which are absolutely meaningless” (1979a, 90).

end-state. The happiness which belongs peculiarly to the way of life of the cloister is not the same happiness as that which belongs peculiarly to the military life. For different pleasures and different happinesses are to a large degree incommensurable: there are no scales of quality or quantity on which to weigh them” (2007, 64). It is telling that both MacIntyre and Hayek are suspicious of any appeals to “social utility” or “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.” MacIntyre urges the reader to ask what actual scheme is being concealed whenever such language is used (2007, 64). Hayek dedicates a chapter of the *Road to Serfdom* to explaining that “social goals” cannot exist and that any references to such fictions obscure the lack of a real agreement so as to swindle people into following a plan they in fact do not wish to follow (2007, 103–4; see also Hayek 1957).¹¹

The link to emotivism enters at the point where the picture of a rational and objective utility falls apart, for if the notion of utility is fictitious and if the whole concept is subjective (as it turns out to be), the search for a technical criterion for action cannot succeed, and the project amounts to nothing more than an expression of feeling. For Hayek, emotivism stands side by side with utilitarianism as an effect of the constructivist effort to set down morality rationally (1970, 14). For MacIntyre, utilitarianism historically links the eighteenth-century effort to ground morality in reason with the twentieth century’s plunge into emotivism (2007, 65).

Because the Enlightenment effort either to devise a new teleology or to create a new categorical status for action has failed, all modern paradigms, functions, and institutions that derive legitimacy from Enlightenment ideas are therefore lacking in philosophical foundation. At this juncture, MacIntyre moves to an indictment of the notion of managerial effectiveness with profound consequences (2007, 76–77). “If I am right in this,” he argues, “we shall . . . also have to conclude that another moral fiction—and perhaps the most culturally powerful of them all—is embodied in the claims to effectiveness and hence to authority made by that central character of the modern social drama, the bureaucratic manager. To a disturbing extent our morality will be disclosed as a theatre of illusions” (76–77). In this regard, MacIntyre and Hayek move along similar lines. Aldous Huxley’s phrase “specialized meaninglessness” accurately captures their feelings (1937, 276).

Hayek connects the dots between Enlightenment philosophies and certain institutions, particularly governments, that claim to hold authority based on their ability to meet rationally imperative ends. He notes the presence of both scientific utilitarianism (which no doubt has shades of “effectiveness” in its language), whereby

11. Hayek is annoyed with the sloppy use of the word *social* and its concealed interventionist bias. “The important thing, to me,” he writes, “is that in all these uses the word ‘social’ presupposes the existence of known and common aims behind the activities of a community, but does not define them. It is simply assumed that ‘society’ has certain concrete tasks that are known to all and are acknowledged by all, and that ‘society’ should direct the endeavours of its individual members to the accomplishment of these tasks” (1967, 242, emphasis in original). What exactly is the benefit of using the term *social* instead of *moral* or *ethical*? Hayek’s answer: to justify state’s micromanagement and coercion while ignoring the rules of personal ethics by shifting the ground and terms of the conversation.

governments base their claim to authority on the ability to satisfy certain economic social goals, and rights theory, whereby governments base their claim to authority on a particular form of justice in modern socialist rhetoric. He explains:

The roots of socialism in constructivist thought are obvious not only in its original form—in which it intended through socialization of the means of production, distribution and exchange to make possible a planned economy to replace the spontaneous order of the market by an organization directed to particular ends. But in the modern form of socialism that tries to use the market in the service of what is called “social justice,” and for this purpose wants to guide the action of men, not by rules of just conduct for the individual, but by the recognized importance of results brought about by the decisions of authority, is no less based upon it. (1970, 14–15)

MacIntyre links the bureaucratic manager’s claim to authority to the inception of the value-neutral fact and causal lawlike generalizations, illusions that purport to empower the manager with the knowledge to predict human action and mold society. He argues:

The claim that the manager makes to effectiveness rests of course on the further claim to possess a stock of knowledge by means of which organizations and social structures can be molded. Such knowledge would have to include a set of factual law-like generalizations which would enable the manager to predict that, if an event or state of affairs of a certain type were to occur or to be brought about, some other event or state of affairs of some specific kind would result. For only such law-like generalizations could yield those particular casual explanations and predictions by means of which the manager could mold, influence and control the social environment. (2007, 77)

MacIntyre notes that these claims mirror the methods of the natural sciences and, further, that they are grounded in a positivist or radical empiricist approach to the factual order (2007, 77). Hayek sees the same predicament and stresses that the factual order of society can be understood only in light of the values people hold (1970, 21–22; 1979a, 88–92). For both men, the foundation of those exercising social control is a fraud that rests on a flawed analogy with the natural sciences, which is exactly what Hayek investigates in *The Counter-revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* (1979a).

No less important and inexorably linked, however, is the presupposition of a kind of knowledge that cannot exist. Indeed, both MacIntyre and Hayek agree that it is perhaps not power that threatens to oppress, but a knowledge problem

(MacIntyre 2007, 77).¹² This problem, both men think, came about when the social scientists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tried to mimic the language and methods of the natural scientists, a form of intellectual prejudice that Hayek, as noted earlier, calls “scientism” (1979a, 24).

MacIntyre notably sees a relationship between the attempted reinvention of morality—the descent into emotivism—and the invention of scientism. “That emergence involved a rejection of all those Aristotelian and quasi-Aristotelian views of the world in which a teleological perspective provided a context in which evaluative claims functioned as a particular kind of factual claim. And with that rejection the concepts both of value and of fact acquired a new character” (2007, 77). In other words, the separation of value from action made possible the spurious idea of an objective social science.

Hayek sees this issue as well and observes that one’s understanding of the factual order holds an important relationship to one’s understanding of value. “We have the curious spectacle that frequently the very same scientists, who particularly emphasize the *wertfrei* (value free) character of science, use that science to discredit the prevailing values as the expression of irrational emotions or particular material interests. Such scientists often give the impression that the only value judgment that is scientifically respectable is the view that our values have no value. This attitude is therefore the result of a defective understanding of the connection between accepted values and the prevailing factual order” (1970, 22). This discussion of fact and value, it must be emphasized, does not preclude a value-free, cause-and-effect science of human action in the tradition of the Austrian school. In the spirit of Ludwig von Mises, one can condemn high-wage policy by pointing out its problems and noting that it will not have its desired effect. This discussion, however, does preclude a scientific, naturalist view of human action that ignores the fact that actions are based on an ordinal scale of values that man expresses through his use of means to accomplish ends.

Fact, Explanation, and Expertise

In his analysis of scientism, MacIntyre begins with the Enlightenment conception of “fact”—that is, the attempt to separate experience from theory, action from perception; to confront the world in an empirical, presuppositionless manner; and to reduce reality into “textures, shapes, smells, sensations, sounds and nothing more” (2007, 80). At the most basic level, the Enlightenment Project looked to replace subjective

12. One of Hayek’s lasting contributions to economic thought has been his work on how markets coordinate dispersed bits of knowledge, the importance of this function for economic development, and governments’ inability to mimic this coordination. MacIntyre’s similar argument was anticipated by Mises and Hayek in the socialist calculation debate of the 1920s. It was, in fact, this problem and Mises’s book *Socialism* ([1922] 2010) that brought a young Hayek to rethink his socialist ideas. See Hayek 1935a, 1935b, 1936, 1940, and 1945.

human experience with the brute facts of an empirical world. It sought to close the gap between fact and experience to the extent that there would be “nothing beyond my experience for me to compare my experience with, so that the contrast between *seems to me* and *is in fact* [can] never be formulated” (80). This paradigm shift provided the epistemological foundation for the mechanical explanation of human action.

Hayek describes something similar in his chapter “The Objectivism of the Scientific Approach” in *The Counter-revolution of Science*. The natural sciences and the social sciences deal with fundamentally different objects: the former deals with “the relations between things,” and the latter deals with “the relations between men and things or the relations between man and man” (1979a, 41). The perceptions that people hold are vital knowledge to the social scientist because actions are predicated on such information. “It would be impossible to explain or understand human action without making use of this knowledge. People do behave in the same manner toward things, not because these things are identical in a physical sense, but because they have learned to classify them as belonging to the same group. . . . In fact, most of the objects of social or human action are not ‘objective facts’ in the narrow sense in which this term is used by Science and contrasted to ‘opinions,’ and they cannot at all be defined in physical terms. So far as human actions are concerned the things *are* what acting people think they are” (44).

The natural sciences, in contrast, have a different calling. Theirs is one of reclassifying objects, of getting down to objective facts, and of disregarding what men think about the world. The main task is to “revise and reconstruct the concepts formed from ordinary experience on the basis of a systematic testing of phenomena, so to be better able to recognize the particular as an instance of a general rule” (Hayek 1979a, 29).

This distinction between the study of human action and the study of things is similar to the one MacIntyre makes when he describes the natural sciences as affecting to “enlarge the distance between *seems* and *is*” (2007, 80). He notes the incompatibility between natural science, which aims to expand this distance, and the empiricism of the Enlightenment project, which aims to close it. For this reason, he finds it extraordinary and contradictory that both can coexist within the same culture and be expressed within the same worldview (2007, 81). The distinction becomes more commensurable when MacIntyre writes of the Aristotelian way of thinking about action, which demands the inclusion of opinions and perceptions, and about what is valuable to human beings. In this way, there is no separation between fact and value because value informs actions; “the one task cannot be discharged without discharging the other” (2007, 82).

Subjective opinions, as Hayek emphasizes, are the data for social scientists, including economists. Because economic science contends with man and his relation to man and things, it cannot commence without acknowledging the principle of subjectivism. Hayek makes his commitment to this methodology clear in a

well-known passage: “And it is probably no exaggeration to say that every important advance in economic theory during the last hundred years was a further step in the consistent application of subjectivism. That the objects of economic activity cannot be defined in objective terms but only with reference to a human purpose goes without saying. . . . Unless we can understand what the acting people mean by their actions any attempt to explain them, that is, to subsume them under rules which connect similar situations with similar actions[,] is bound to fail” (1979a, 52).¹³

We arrive then, in general terms, at a value-informed, Aristotelian view of action¹⁴ and a value-free, scientific view of action. The latter view for MacIntyre contains two crucial conditions, causal invariance and lawlike generalizations, as he spells out: “To cite a cause is to cite a necessary condition *or* a sufficient condition *or* a necessary and sufficient condition as the antecedent of whatever behavior is to be explained. So every mechanical causal sequence exemplifies some universal generalization and that generalization has a precisely specifiable scope” (2007, 80–81, italics in original).

The search for causal invariance manifests the same sort of scientific hubris as Hayek’s “objectivism” (1979a, 77). In this regard, Hayek is referring to the program of Auguste Comte, the behaviorists, and all other thinkers and schools of thought that seek to discover a formula for human action based on observable stimuli and behavioral responses because, of course, “science” deals only with what is observable.¹⁵ “What is it,” MacIntyre asks, “about intentions, purposes and reasons that makes them thus unmentionable? It is the fact that all these expressions refer to or presuppose reference to the beliefs of the agents in question” (2007, 83).

The search for lawlike generalizations is merely a broader application of causal invariance, as MacIntyre explains: “So every mechanical causal sequence exemplifies some universal generalization and that generalization has a precisely specifiable scope” (2007, 89). Hayek calls this presumption “historicism” (1979a, 111; see also Popper 2002), referring specifically to the methodology of the later German Historical School, which fell under the influence of the “scientific currents of the age” and “came to represent history as the empirical study of society from which ultimately

13. In *The Sensory Order* (1999), Hayek develops a theory of perception and mind to explain the process by which people classify perceptions not according to physical laws.

14. MacIntyre and Hayek differ on the interplay between action and value or between “is” and “ought.” There are three key ways of looking at this problem. MacIntyre embraces the Aristotelian view “in which a teleological perspective provided a context in which evaluative claims functioned as a particular kind of factual claim” (2007, 77). Hayek believes that legitimate value judgment on “what is” can be made by appealing to certain “ought to be” principles, but that “from our understanding of causal connections between facts alone, we can derive no conclusions about the validity of value” (1978, 22). The Enlightenment position holds that “ought” statements are merely expressions of emotion and that cold experience is all that actually exists. In MacIntyre’s language, we are confronted with an Aristotelian view, a scholastic view, and an Enlightenment view (2007, 81). Hayek falls into the scholastic category.

15. It is noteworthy that MacIntyre and Hayek condemn the scientific approach for ignoring that even rudimentary scientific observation requires the acknowledgment of a theory of optics and classification. See Hayek 1969, 35–49, and 1979a, 78–79; and MacIntyre 2007, 80–81.

generalization would emerge” (1979a, 114). Marx, Hegel, and Comte also reside in the historicist camp, as Hayek scholar Bruce Caldwell notes: “By claiming that various laws determine the development of history, these historicists deny the importance of human intentional action in shaping events” (2004, 251).

The nineteenth-century German battle over these contending approaches to the study of human action is known as the *Methodenstreit*. This “battle over methods” is especially relevant to the present discussion because it illustrates clearly the apprehensions MacIntyre and Hayek have regarding the scientific approach. Simply put, the German Historical School sought to ensure its members’ pay and position in the imperial bureaucracy by pushing the theory that with enough data, society could be scientifically planned and coordinated—the data, of course, were never enough. Those who believed that an a priori study of human action that took into account value and choice could yield certain principles of economizing action—and therefore needed no data-collection bureaucracy—were dismissed as unscientific and accused of making “premature generalizations.” It need hardly be mentioned that the imperial bureaucracy’s “scientific” conclusions were consistently in agreement with the German empire’s policies (Caldwell 2004, 83–84).

MacIntyre in essence summarizes the entirety of Hayek’s work on the abuse of reason when he writes that “[t]he civil servant has as his nineteenth-century counterpart and opposite the social reformer: Saint Simonians, Comtians, utilitarians, ameliorists such as Charles Booth, the early Fabian socialists. *Their* characteristic lament is: if only the government could learn to be scientific!” (2007, 85, emphasis in original). The government’s response is, MacIntyre notes, to do exactly that, by increasing its funding, recruits, and bureaucrats, all under the false claim to expertise. Those familiar with Hayek’s work will immediately note the similarity between MacIntyre’s indictment of bureaucratic expertise and Hayek’s belief that the economic problem is at root a knowledge-coordination problem.¹⁶ In other words, the economic planners and technocratic experts who by shouting “Science!” claim a sort of knowledge that supposedly justifies their manipulative power are in fact claiming a sort of knowledge that does not exist. “The application of engineering technique to the whole of society requires indeed that the director possess the same complete knowledge of the whole society that the engineer possesses of his limited world” (Hayek 1979a, 173). Hayek’s point is that the engineer, socialist or otherwise, does not and cannot possess that knowledge (1979a, 169–70).¹⁷

The claim to value neutrality and the justification of manipulative power are on the surface of this whole discussion. At the bottom is the history of how man’s abuse of reason changed his view of fact and value. So, MacIntyre summarizes, what began

16. On economics as a knowledge problem, see O’Driscoll 1977 and Sowell 1980.

17. The scientific assumption, Hayek remarks, explains why price fluctuations, which are vital to the operation of an economy, often seem irrational to the economic planner and why he seeks to control them or, in the case of Otto Neurath and his *in natura* program, to abolish them altogether by doing away with money.

with the Enlightenment's new ideal for social science has become the foundation of the political institutions of modernity. It turns out that the legitimacy of those institutions rests on whether the Enlightenment's central claims have been successfully defended or not (2007, 86–87).

Scientism, Generalizations in Social Science, and Social Planning

MacIntyre challenges the philosophy of social science that takes the social sciences' task to be the provision of lawlike generalizations for social planners. He argues that the Enlightenment vision of social science in the scientific tradition of Comte is a failure. Although the empirical claim to a predictive law of human action analogous to a law of natural science may provide cushy employment opportunities for researchers (one thinks of the *Methodenstreit*), it is riddled with historical problems and theoretical mistakes (2007, 88–91).

Hayek agrees. He regrets that the older historical method of Ranke and Niebuhr was displaced by the historicism of Hegel and Comte (1979a, 383). Social science, Hayek maintains, ought not to imitate the natural sciences, where empirical study yields valid generalizations, but should seek instead to explain the spontaneous orders that result from human action rather than from human design. Like other Austrian economists, he disparages the original motto of the Econometric Society, "Science is Prediction." He notes further that the existence of useful but undesigned institutions is usually denied by scientism's practitioners, who hold to the mistaken belief that conscious action is preferable and superior to any spontaneous orders and invisible-hand mechanisms (1979a, 98–105; see also Caldwell 2004, 250–51).

It is extraordinary that in his indictment of lawlike generalizations, MacIntyre deals with the Phillips curve, the fundamentally Keynesian model that claims, on the basis of historical observations, that a stable trade-off exists between the rate of price inflation and the rate of unemployment. The stagflation of the 1970s created a quandary for Phillips curve enthusiasts, and the theory has now fallen largely, though not entirely, out of favor. Its errors are many, but as Austrian economist Jeffery Herbener notes, it was principally wrong in that it "committed the fallacy of replacing concepts grounded in human action with arbitrary mathematical constructs" (1992, 52). Economics deals with human action, which is "triggered" by human opinions, views, and preferences and therefore cannot be quantified and reduced to predictive mathematical functions, as Hayek explains in somewhat broader language: "Take such things as tools, food, medicine, weapons, words, sentences, communications, and acts of production. . . . It is easily seen that all these concepts . . . refer not to some objective properties possessed by the things, or which the observer can find out about them, but to views which some other person holds about the things. . . . They are all instances of

what are sometimes called ‘teleological concepts’ (1942, 59). Here again we find Hayek to be emphasizing an Aristotelian-Thomist theme.

The sort of knowledge with which economics deals thus “cannot enter into statistics and therefore cannot be conveyed to any central authority in statistical form,” Hayek explains (1945, 83). Or, as MacIntyre writes, “The notion of social control embodied in the notion of expertise is indeed a masquerade. Our social order is in a very literal sense out of our, and indeed anyone’s, control. No one is or could be in charge” (2007, 107). Those who hold power because of some claim to an objective, value-free knowledge of the social order of things and who claim that because of this knowledge they are best suited to guide and plan society are simply disguising their own will and preferences with technical language.¹⁸ The Enlightenment did not produce a formula for the scientific management of human society, but merely the illusion of such a formula. MacIntyre concludes, “The most effective bureaucrat is the best actor” (2007, 107).

In light of these problems, Hayek clarifies the limitations of prediction and sets out some parameters within which predictive social science can occur. “In consequence our knowledge of the principle by which these phenomena are produced will rarely if ever enable us to predict the precise result of any concrete situation. While we can explain the principle on which certain phenomena are produced and from this knowledge exclude the possibility of certain results, for example of certain events occurring together, our knowledge will in a sense be only negative; that is, it will merely enable us to preclude certain results but not enable us to narrow the range of possibilities sufficiently so that only one remains” (1979a, 72–73). The Enlightenment effort to construct rationally a scientifically predictable society—what Popper calls “historicism”—is doomed to failure by the very nature of human action. One can know certain principles of economics based on logic—for example, if the government raises the minimum wage, unemployment will be greater than it otherwise would be, or if the government taxes the productive segments of society, their output will be less than it otherwise would be—but one cannot obtain the detailed kind of economic knowledge that a planning body requires in order to function successfully. This knowledge, Hayek contends, is transmitted and coordinated through the spontaneous orders that arise in society, especially through the price system. Rational economic calculation is therefore denied to the central planner (1979a, 176–77). In other words, by the very nature and structure of reality, reason, and knowledge, successful socialist calculation is impossible.

18. I cannot resist remarking on C. S. Lewis’s observation on the difference between “rulers” and “leaders” and the use of the latter word for the former. He writes, “The modern State exists not to protect our rights but to do us good or make us good—anyway, to do something to us or to make us something. Hence the new name ‘leaders’ for those who were once ‘rulers.’ We are less their subjects than their wards, pupils, or domestic animals. There is nothing left of which we can say to them, ‘Mind your own business.’ Our whole lives are their business.” Compare this statement with Hayek’s idea of the rule of law, and it becomes apparent that the modern state has little if anything to do with “law.” The state’s business is planning society, not “law.” Its business, as Lewis emphasizes, is *you* (Lewis 1958, 2).

MacIntyre makes a similar claim when he writes that “[t]otalitarianism of a certain kind, as imagined by Aldous Huxley or George Orwell, is therefore impossible” (2007, 106). But he warns (as does Hayek), “What the totalitarian project will always produce will be a kind of rigidity and inefficiency which may contribute in the long run to its defeat. We need remember however the voices from Auschwitz and Gulag Archipelago which tell us just how long that long run is” (106).

Both MacIntyre’s and Hayek’s contention is amplified in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s comments on the Enlightenment Project:

It has made man the measure of all things on earth-imperfect man, who is never free of pride, self-interest, envy, vanity, and dozens of other defects. We are now paying for the mistakes which were not properly appraised at the beginning of the journey. On the way from the Renaissance to our days we have enriched our experience, but we have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility. We have placed too much hope in politics and social reforms, only to find out that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life. It is trampled by the party mob in the East, by the commercial one in the West. There is the essence of the crisis: the split in the world is less terrifying than the similarity of the disease afflicting its main sections. . . . [I]t would be retrogressive to hold on to the ossified formulas of the Enlightenment. (1978, 55)

MacIntyre and Hayek appear to draw a similar lesson from their respective projects. At the conclusion of his essay “Scientism and the Study of Society,” Hayek quotes M. R. Cohen, who said that “the great lesson of humility which science teaches us, that we can never be omnipotent or omniscient, is the same as that of all great religions: man is not and never will be the god before whom he must bow down” (in Hayek 1979a, 182). One might recall MacIntyre’s earlier remark regarding the social scientist’s search for the power of God. At the end of his life, Hayek titled his concluding refutation of socialism *The Fatal Conceit* (1988). MacIntyre seems likely to agree with that choice because although social planning begins with making man’s reason supreme, it ends with the destruction of reason itself by misunderstanding its nature and its limits (2007, 180).

Conclusion

MacIntyre and Hayek, starting from very different political, philosophical, and religious points of view, arrive at many of the same conclusions in their studies on the history of human thought, society, and modernity. Both reject rationalist ethics,

utilitarianism, and emotivism. Both see the general philosophical contribution of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas as the bedrock of Western thought and connect the Enlightenment worldview, which abandoned this older tradition, to modern social science and twentieth-century totalitarianism. MacIntyre reinforces Hayek and vice versa. Both indict the Enlightenment Project and provide careful suggestions about the way out of our current impasse.

Scientism is the embodiment of the whole troubled process whereby social scientists, seeking the sort of certainty and scientific character attained by the natural sciences, deem themselves capable of producing social outcomes every bit as predictable as laboratory experiments. This effort's failure is ever present in Hayek's work on law, philosophy, and economics and is also a key component of MacIntyre's work on ethics and modernity. In a broader sense, MacIntyre and Hayek help us see the big picture, albeit starting from different premises. They help us see how ethics, reason, science, and human action hang together.

Michael D. Aeschliman has noticed that C. S. Lewis and Alasdair MacIntyre peer through the same window when they talk about scientism, morality, and traditional reason (1983, 83–85). F. A. Hayek should be added to this picture. As MacIntyre reminds us of the proper place of reason and as Lewis reminds us of the proper place of man's telos, Hayek reminds us, in more concrete terms, of the proper place of human power, knowledge, and planning. Each of these writers does so by emphasizing man's uniqueness as a willful and rational animal, fundamentally different from "things." The scientific impulse to abolish this distinction, to see man as a part of nature in the same way a stone or a tree is a part of nature, in the end proves detrimental to human existence and experience. Only by turning away from this trajectory can we put ourselves back on the right road.

Compare this conclusion with Paul Krugman's admission to the *New York Times Book Review*: "I went into economics because I read Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* novels, in which social scientists save galactic civilization, and that's what I wanted to be" ("Up Front" 2009). That such a prominent economist openly clings to this approach reminds us that MacIntyre and Hayek's message remains highly relevant today.

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